



BEING HEARD

**A guide for foster parents and others
advocating for children**





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DEVELOPED BY



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About CHAMPS

CHAMPS (Children Need Amazing Parents) is a national policy and communications campaign to ensure bright futures for kids in foster care by promoting the highest quality parenting. With research showing that a loving, supportive family is critical to the healthy development of all children, CHAMPS calls on policy makers, state and local foster care agencies, and foster parents to create a new partnership that can give foster parents, caseworkers, and children the resources and support they need. CHAMPS aims to advance policy reforms in 20 to 25 states to help ensure that children in foster care have access to quality foster parenting.

Learn more about fosteringchamps.org.



About NACAC (North American Council on Adoptable Children)

NACAC is part of the CHAMPS campaign and has put together this toolkit to help prepare you to be a successful advocate and achieve state policy changes. For more than 45 years, NACAC has been advocating for laws, policies, and practices that improve children's chances of having a permanent loving family, and ensure that adoptive and other parents have the support they need. These efforts include helping to create groups of parents, professionals, and youth in communities across the US and Canada that successfully build, improve, and expand supportive services. Learn more at nacac.org.

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Introduction

With more than 400,000 children in foster care, the support that foster parents provide helps our children and families, our neighbors, and our future. Advocating for policies and practices that promote quality foster parenting is the most direct way to enact changes that will positively affect the lives of children in foster care.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

Advocacy means supporting a certain viewpoint or group of people by using your voice, talents, and experiences — with the goal of improving your life or the lives of others. Often, this means persuading local, state, or federal governments to make policy changes that allocate funding or create protections for communities in need.

Why You Should Advocate

Even if you have never done any policy or administrative advocacy before, as a foster parent, you are in a unique position to be an effective advocate because of your first-hand experience caring for children and youth in foster care. You have important knowledge to share and your thoughts and opinions can persuade policymakers and administrators to make choices in the best interests of children and families. Your stories and personal examples show the real, on-the-ground impact of policies and practices and can be incredibly persuasive.

With your personal expertise, you are in the perfect position to explain just how a child or teen will be better off as a result of decisions legislators and administrators make. And you can also elevate the voices of the children you are caring for, ensuring that their perspective is accurately represented in the advocacy efforts, even when they can't be present themselves.

In some cases, there may be barriers you'll need to overcome to take on an advocacy role:

- First is often just a fear of the unknown or worry that you don't know enough. You can overcome this barrier by working with a group of your fellow parents — there's strength and support in numbers and together you can use this guide to build your knowledge. If there's an existing support group or foster parent association in your area, contact them to see if you can join their advocacy efforts or if they can connect you with other parents you might work with.
- Second is worry about backlash from your agency. If this is the case, it can help to start by meeting with your agency to get their perspective and hear any of their concerns. You may learn something that helps improve your advocacy messaging or even changes your perspective on what the problem is. In many cases, the agency could become a partner in your work. In other cases, having them know your intentions and your plan can reduce any surprise that might have caused problems. Working with a group can also help,

especially if parents represent various communities and even agencies. This makes it more clear that you have a systemic issue not just a problem with your worker or agency. Several key principles are helpful as you prepare an advocacy message:

- Don't make it personal (don't name caseworkers or other staff); rather, focus on systemic issues.
 - If possible, try to begin on a positive note by recognizing the agency for a policy or practice it does well.
 - Be sure to provide solutions to challenges the agency is facing, and keep them informed about ways you can help and support their work.
-
- In some cases, foster parent groups or associations that have state or county funding struggle with how to balance the work they do with that funding with any advocacy they take on. We strongly encourage you to find the balance! Many publicly funded organizations both advocate and lobby, and you shouldn't keep yourself out of the advocacy arena when you have knowledge based on the experiences of so many parents, children, and youth. It's important to:
 - Find some funds to support advocacy. It could be member dues, special event revenue, training fees, or small grants or fundraisers.
 - Talk with your funding agency about your advocacy goals and see how your objectives align. Consider their feedback and keep them informed, even if you aren't working together.
 - Keep the boundaries clear. Make sure that you track any expenses (staff time, copying, phones, etc.) that are spent on advocacy and don't charge them to your grant unless it's part of your grant contract. Share information with your funder about how you track expenses so they don't have to worry.
 - Consider engaging volunteers to do the advocacy work so your staff don't have to wear both hats.

What's Included

This advocacy toolkit will help you to identify, advocate for, and implement changes in your community related to the six CHAMPS policy goals outlined below. It includes detailed information about:

- Developing an advocacy goal
- Working with executive branch officials of your state, county or city agencies (including agencies in charge of child welfare, health care, or social services)
- Working with your state legislators
- Telling your story
- Building your network
- Building relationships

We also have a separate guide related to working with the media. You can access it at <https://fosteringchamps.org/advocacy-toolkit/>.

1

Setting Your Advocacy Goal

Champs Policy Goals

The six policy goals that CHAMPS identified to help improve child welfare systems are:

1. Support relationships between birth and foster families
2. Implement data-driven recruitment and retention practices for foster parents
3. Engage foster parents in decision-making
4. Provide timely access to trusted, dedicated staff and peer support to foster parents
5. Prioritize placements with family members and other family connections
6. Ensure timely access to physical and mental health services.

As you read through the following questions to consider for each policy goal, take note of what stands out to you as something you may want to address. This will begin the process of identifying your advocacy goal! Next, we will provide you with some possible advocacy opportunities for the different policy goals.

Don't forget to keep an eye out for other policy changes that might help guide your goal or jump start your advocacy. For example, when a federal law passes (such as the Family First Prevention Services Act), state legislators and administrators often have to act to bring state policies and practices in line with the law. This can be opportunity for you to identify your related goals and be part of the state-level change.

1. Support relationships between birth and foster families

Research has demonstrated that frequent contact between children in foster care and their birth families improves a child's behavior and adjustment to being in care. Furthermore, positive relationships and interactions between the foster and birth families support frequent visitation, create a sense of belonging for children, and improve parenting practices.

Questions to consider:

- Does your state's pre-service training include information about working with birth parents? Does it include and discuss the birth parent perspective?
- What is the messaging for foster parent recruitment? Is it about helping families, not just children? What is the public image of foster parents? Of birth parents?

- Is adoption brought up early in the process or prioritized? Is it clear that reunification or placement with relatives are the first goals for all children in care?
- How do caseworkers talk about birth or foster parents and what training do current or prospective parents receive about ways birth and foster parents can work together?
- What narrative are foster parents creating about birth parents? Are negative beliefs and stereotypes challenged by caseworkers, support groups, agency staff, training materials?
- How does your state encourage and support the unique relationship between birth and foster parents in concrete ways? Is assistance provided for specific challenges that may arise?
- Are there policies or practices your agency has recently implemented to better support birth and foster family relationships? If so, how can you build on these steps?

Additional information about this policy goal can be found at: <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/support-relationships-between-birth-and-foster-families/>

2. Implement data-driven recruitment and retention practices

Research has identified lack of data as a critical barrier to states' recruitment and retention efforts. Studies and expert guidance have consistently highlighted the need to:

1. Use data on foster parent and child characteristics to effectively recruit families that match the needs of children in foster care, and
2. Regularly collect feedback from foster parents through surveys and other means to inform recruitment and retention policies and practices.

Questions to consider:

- Does your state have a central census or database of all foster parents so there is a clear picture of what types of parents are needed most?
- How does your state analyze and use data to improve placement matching, improve foster parent retention (such as surveys to understand why parents stop fostering) and conduct targeted recruitment?
- In what ways does your state work to retain foster families? What types of support, appreciation, and opportunities for assistance do they offer?
- Are there policies or practices your agency has recently implemented to better use data? If so, how can you build on these steps?

Additional information about this policy goal can be found at: <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/implement-data-driven-recruitment-and-retention-practices/>

3. Engage foster parents in decision-making

Research has shown that foster parent involvement in case planning is linked to increased foster parent satisfaction and intent to continue fostering. Foster families have valuable child-specific information that is important to share with courts and agencies — information that can assist with case planning, permanency planning, and decision-making in health care and education.

Questions to consider:

- Are foster parents consistently given all known medical and educational information about the children who are placed in their homes?
- Are foster parents routinely notified of court hearings and invited to participate in planning meetings regarding children in their homes?
- Is there a formal process in place for involving foster parents in policy decisions made by the child welfare agency, private foster care agencies, and others?
- Are there policies or practices your agency has recently implemented to ensure a true partnership with foster parents? If so, how can you build on these steps?

Research has shown that foster parent involvement in case planning is linked to increased foster parent satisfaction and intent to continue fostering.

Additional information about this policy goal can be found at: <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/engage-foster-parents-in-decision-making/>

4. Provide timely access to trusted, dedicated staff and peer support to foster parents

Research has demonstrated that children in foster care achieve better outcomes when they experience stable placements. Importantly, research has also shown that support to foster parents is associated with improved foster parent retention and decreased placement failure. The types of support identified as being critical to foster parents includes timely support from caseworkers, effective training, support during crisis, and peer support.

Questions to consider:

- Are foster parents receiving regular visits/contact from social workers, private agency staff, guardians ad litem, and others involved in the system? Are these individuals responsive when foster parents reach out for information, with questions, or to request support?
- Does your state have a formal peer support program that enables foster parents to support and mentor each other?
- Are respite, behavioral health, and other services available to meet the needs of children in foster care and their caregivers?
- Are there policies or practices your agency has recently implemented to better support foster families? If so, how can you build on these steps?

Additional information can be found about this policy goal at: <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/provide-timely-access-to-trusted-dedicated-staff-and-peer-support/>

5. Prioritize placements with family members and other family connections

Research has shown that, overall, children in foster care experience more stability and better outcomes when they are placed with relative caregivers. Children placed with kin are also more likely to experience fewer placement disruptions and exhibit improved behavior. Over the last

10 years there has been a notable increase in kinship placements; however, there is much room for continued progress as no state rated a Strength on item 10, Relative Placement, in the last round of Child and Family Services Reviews.

Questions to consider:

- Does your state or county have formal policies that prioritize placing children with kin (relatives or non-relative connections)?
- Are there licensing barriers faced by kin that could be resolved?
- Does your community have strong support systems for families with kinship placements?
- Are there policies or practices your agency has recently implemented to better find, engage, and support relatives and fictive kin? If so, how can you build on these steps?

Additional information about this policy goal can be found at: <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/prioritize-placements-with-family-members/>

6. Ensure timely access to physical and mental health services

Research has consistently identified that children in foster care have high levels of physical and mental health needs. Foster parents report that addressing those needs is often a challenge and even a reason for discontinuing their service as foster parents. In addition, the inability of foster parents to manage the physical and mental health needs of the children in their care has been linked to placement disruption. Studies also show that when foster parents receive appropriate supports, including access to children's physical and mental health services, their retention improves.

Questions to consider:

- Do foster parents in your area receive a complete medical history when a child is placed with them? How are these records provided?
- Does your area have a mobile crisis response service?
- Are there programs to provide education, information, and support for foster parents regarding specific physical and behavioral health needs of children?
- Are there policies or practices your agency has recently implemented to increase access to health services? If so, how can you build on these steps?

Additional information about this policy goal can be found at: <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/ensure-timely-access-to-physical-and-mental-health-services/>

Study the Issues

To help focus your efforts, select one of the policy goals you would most like to address and learn as much as you can about the issues related to this goal. You can read articles, attend meetings and events held by your local foster parent associations, and connect with organizations that understand the complex policies surrounding foster care. Collect facts, statistics, and anecdotes that will contribute to your advocacy.

There are five types of information you may need to gather:

- relevant laws (local, state, or federal)
- relevant rules and regulations
- relevant research and data (such as national studies that provide state data or findings from federal oversight)
- demographic information on the children affected by the problem
- testimonials illustrating exactly how the problem affects specific children and families

Try to determine whom you need to talk to so you can gather additional information. This could be legislators, heads of committees or task forces, key people from agencies, and other government officials. Some of these people may be sympathetic to your cause but are unable to do advocacy work because their jobs prohibit it. They may be willing to provide you with information, as long as you're the one doing the advocacy.

Child welfare data is public information and public agencies cannot refuse to provide you with information that you request as long as it's total or summary data (not about individual children and families). Get a copy of your state's "right to information" law. States are required to submit foster care and adoption data to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, for the Adoption and Foster Care Data Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS). AFCARS (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/adoption-fostercare>) is an excellent place to start since these reports include summary information about case plans, length of time in care, and age of children in care. **Child Welfare Information Gateway** (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/>) and Child Trends (<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/state-level-data-for-understanding-child-welfare-in-the-united-states>) also have data from most states. Another good place to look for data is the Kids Count Data Center (<https://datacenter.kidscount.org/>).

Research organizations or universities in your state may be able to help you in gathering or interpreting data. Data drives many advocacy efforts — major decision-makers use statistics to understand how widespread an issue is. Many states and counties have a child welfare data dashboard which provide public displays of summary data for the state or county. An internet search can help you find this data dashboard if your state or county has one.

During this research phase, you can also search for other groups who are doing similar work. In addition, you may want to know what other states are doing and how they achieved their goals.

Setting Your Advocacy Goal

After studying your issue, you need to know who makes decisions that affect the issue — is it local, state, federal? Is it a law set by legislators or a rule or policy set by an agency? While your audience will frequently be your state legislature, along with the governor and agency leaders such as the state agency in charge of child welfare, you also want to consider county agencies, boards of commissioners, and private foster care agencies or service providers. And, of course, the media can play a huge role in the success of your efforts. Familiarizing yourself with the major decision-makers and communicating effectively with them is one of the best ways to expand and strengthen your advocacy efforts.

From conducting your research, you likely have identified a number of issues you are interested in addressing, related to your goal. To choose among these, you can list the related problems you feel are affecting foster and adoptive families. Look for connections among the ideas to see if some of them can be combined to address a single issue.

Once you choose an issue, be sure to restate the problem from the point of view of the children who are affected by it. Most decision makers value taking care of vulnerable children. For example, if you are advocating for increased foster parent engagement in decision making, you need to explain how this results in better outcomes for kids: When foster parents are partners with the child welfare agency, both can make the best possible decisions about the children in their care. Make sure your solution is one that can be achieved by the decision makers you are targeting.

Once you choose an issue, be sure to restate the problem from the point of view of the children who are affected by it.

Make an inventory of the resources available for the issue — identify the skills, funds, connections, and information you have and those that you need. If you find that your “need” column is much longer than your “have” column, narrow your efforts or find individuals and groups that can lend their abilities or tools to your cause. There is always strength in numbers. and building a coalition to work on your issues will expand and strengthen your advocacy efforts. Although it may be tempting to try to fix everything right away, aim for a manageable focus. You’ll be far more likely to have success and will be able to build on those successes at a later time!

Create goals that are SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timebound.

- **Specific:** Include information that will state the who, what, when, where, why, and how of your plan.
- **Measurable:** You need to be able to measure your efforts to know if you achieve your goals.
- **Achievable:** Keep your volunteers willing, motivated, and able to do advocacy work by making your goals possible to achieve.
- **Realistic:** Think of the time, money, and people you have to do your work and make your objectives realistically match the resources you have.
- **Timebound:** Your long-term goal or vision may take time to achieve, but your smaller goals and objectives should be achievable within three months.

Potential Advocacy Opportunities for the Six CHAMPS Policy Goals

The following are possible advocacy opportunities for each of the CHAMPS policy goals. You can find one-pagers on each of these goals with examples and research you can use at <https://fosteringchamps.org/policy/frequently-requested-resources/>

1. Support relationships between birth and foster families

- Request a meeting with decision-makers in your state or county. This could be leaders of the child welfare agency, directors of child placing agencies, leaders of your Court Improvement Program, or legislators. Use this time to discuss the importance of fostering relationships between birth and foster parents. Ask them to develop a shared parenting policy establishing a practice where foster and birth parents work together for the benefit of the child, **which could include adapting pre-service training for foster parents as well as addressing how agency staff interact with foster and birth parents.**

Ask to present (possibly along with a foster and birth parent team who has worked well together) at a workshop or conference for caseworkers, foster parents, or others involved in your child welfare system. Use the opportunity to discuss this policy goal and to share the perspectives of foster and birth parents

- Write an op-ed or letter to the editor. This could help influence public opinion as well as inform or inspire policymakers.

2. Implement data driven recruitment and retention practices

- Ask your child welfare agency if they will conduct a foster parent census to obtain data that could be used to determine where, how, and whom to recruit. If they are not interested, consider asking legislators to request one.
- Develop a plan for recruitment and retention based on your local or regional data by gathering a group of stakeholders, including foster parents, case workers, child placing agencies and policymakers.

3. Engage foster parents in decision-making

- Ask your child welfare agency or legislature to establish a parent advisory board that reviews and advises on policy decisions and suggests changes to legislation, department policy, and common practices.
- Encourage the child welfare agency to issue clear guidance about what information must be shared with foster parents and what cannot be shared.
- Identify foster parents who can sit on existing committees, boards, and planning groups related to child welfare so they can represent the voice of foster parents in decisions made by those bodies. Encourage the child welfare agency to require foster parent participation in all such bodies.

4. Provide foster parents with timely access to trusted dedicated staff and peer support

- Ask the child welfare agency to conduct a survey or needs assessment of foster parents in your state or county to determine how responsive the system is to their needs and where the gaps may be in service provision. If they can't, conduct your own.
- Meet with officials from your child welfare agency to discuss establishing a toll-free helpline that foster parents can call for assistance with a variety of topics.
- Ask the child welfare agency or the legislature to fund a peer mentor program using experienced foster, adoptive, and/or kinship caregivers to support new caregivers.

5. Prioritize placements with family members and other family connections

- Organize a meeting of child welfare stakeholders, including kinship families and policymakers, to discuss barriers to kinship placements, the benefits of prioritizing kin, and policy needed to ensure that kin are the first placement whenever possible.
- Ask the child welfare agency to establish policies that require caseworkers to begin searching for kin before removal of a child and to exhaust efforts to place children with kin before placing them in foster care.

6. Provide timely access to physical and mental health services

- Organize a meeting with policy makers and stakeholders to discuss service needs, crisis mobilization, and the federally required Health Oversight and Coordination plan for your state.
- Conduct a needs assessment of foster, adoptive, and kinship parents in your area to learn their specific needs for training and support related to developmental delays, caring for medically fragile children, trauma, and prenatal substance exposure. Share the results with your child welfare agency and legislators.
- Work with agencies that provide training to develop and mandate training for foster parents in trauma, mental health, and substance exposure.

Now that you have an advocacy goal, it's time to learn more about working with the legislature or the executive branch and to focus on networking, building relationships, and telling stories.

2

Working with Legislators

Setting the Stage

Now that you've identified your advocacy goal and determined that decisions about your issue are made in the legislature, it's time to take your next steps.

1. Survey the landscape

Find out if there are others who are already advocating for your issue and what strategies are currently being implemented on this or a related issue. Remember that there is power in numbers, and you will be most effective advocating with others. When you are looking around, don't forget about different types of advocates. Some of the best advocacy includes young people who have experienced foster care and adoption. It can also be helpful to connect with organizations outside of child welfare with interests that overlap. For example, organizations that advocate for issues such as education, child care, or health care can sometimes be helpful allies in advocating for child welfare reforms.

If there isn't already a group working on the issues you care about, you may want to form your own. This will take some time and while you are developing this, you can simultaneously work on building relationships with legislators.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AS AN INDIVIDUAL

As an individual, you can contact your legislator to voice support or concern about a bill related to an issue you would like to address. You can visit, email, write letters, make phone calls, respond to alerts, and/or recruit others to join. Legislators pay extra attention to a bill when they hear from as few as three to five constituents! It's a great way to have an impact as you begin your advocacy journey.

2. Understand how your state legislature works

If your issue relates to a **state law**, your audience will be your **state legislators**. (See box below if you're interested in federal advocacy.) Every state except Nebraska has two separate legislative chambers or houses. In the majority of states, the smaller chamber is referred to as the Senate and the larger chamber is called the House of Representatives.

You can look up your state legislators at https://openstates.org/find_your_legislator/.

FEDERAL ADVOCACY

If you discover your issue is shaped by federal law, your audience will be the United States Congress, which consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Just as in the state legislature, bills are brought to the appropriate committee for review and committee representatives will be an important focus for your advocacy. *The Schoolhouse Rock: America — I'm Just a Bill* music video is a fun and informative overview of the federal legislative process: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgVKvqTltto>.

You can find your US Senators and Representatives at <https://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member>

3. Meet with your state child welfare agency

Even when the decisions about your issue are legislative, it's great to start by meeting with your state child welfare agency. You may discover that the child welfare agency can make a rule change and it does not need to go to the legislature. Even if that isn't the case, you will be able to find out if your child welfare agency is interested in being an ally and can provide you with data and information, or if they are opposed to what you are hoping to accomplish. Legislatures often turn to the department for advice or guidance so knowing where they stand is really important. (See our tip sheet on working with the executive branch for more information.)

4. Determine key participants in the legislature

Your next step is to determine which legislators you'll want to target. State legislatures operate mainly through committees when considering proposed bills. As a result, representatives of committees related to your issue will be an important focus for your advocacy efforts.

What committee makes decisions about foster care? Which legislators are the chairs of key funding or topic committees? Are there decision-makers who have a personal connection to foster care or adoption? These are the legislators to connect with first. You can learn about the different committees, and who serves on them by going to your state legislature's website.

TIP:

Keep a database or spreadsheet of the legislators you need to reach and those you have already established a relationship with. Include fields such as:

- Name of legislator
- District
- Committee assignments
- Contact information
- Key constituents
- Connection to foster care if any
- Allies who have a connection
- Dates of contact
- Follow-up needed

In most cases, it's best to set the stage and begin building relationships with policy makers long before they are making decisions. Making connections and educating lawmakers about key issues is something you can do any time of year. It's also really important to offer yourself as a resource to show that you are able to give as well as receive. Some ways that you could offer help are by serving on a task force or committee or by answering questions about foster care issues. (See our chapter on building relationships.)

If possible, get legislators' cell phone numbers. This enables you to text them when information or feedback is needed quickly. Connecting with them on social media is also a good way to make quick contact and to publicly thank them when they do something in support of your goals.

5. Find others to help with outreach

Because legislators respond best to their own constituents, reach out to parents, youth, and other advocates to find constituents who live in the legislative districts you're hoping to target. This way, your advocacy can come directly from a constituent whenever possible.

You can also research the legislator and try to find an agency, client, or personal connection to establish a stronger relationship with them. Another good strategy is to talk to other advocates or lobbyists and ask if they have a good relationship with the legislator you're trying to connect with. Often, they will be willing to introduce you and help you begin establishing a relationship. They may also have valuable background information about the legislator that can help you strategize for your meeting.

6. Plan when you'll do your outreach

Before you reach out, you need to know when your legislators will be working on your issues. Most legislatures have set times when they are in session and are actively working on and voting on legislation. This time varies from state to state, so research your legislature. Knowing when decisions are being made and when decision-makers are gathered will help you begin planning well in advance so you're ready to advocate when your issues are or could be on their agenda.

Advocating with Legislators

Once you're ready to begin advocating on a key issue, you have a number of options for how you reach out to the key legislators you've identified. We explore each below.

1. Call, text, email, or write to legislators

Contacting a legislator by phone, text, mail, or email is a simple way to share your position without spending too much time or money. However, when legislators are in session, they receive a lot of these messages. In general, calls get more attention than emails. To increase your chances of being heard, send a brief, personalized message to your legislator when they're not in session.

When reaching out:

- Do some research to learn about legislative staff who work on foster care. In many states key legislators or committees have staff members who handle various types of issues — for example, health care, employment, education, etc. If you can't identify someone who is assigned to foster care, ask for a legislative director and start with that person.

- Consider sending a note or email to the legislator and appropriate staff first, then following up with a phone call to establish a relationship with your official while they have the time to listen to your concerns.
- Identify yourself as a constituent right away.
- Keep your key points to one page or a five-minute phone call.
- Refer to the specific bill if discussing a piece of legislation.
- Provide factual information and specific examples whenever possible.

Working as a team? Consider organizing a letter-writing campaign. In a letter-writing campaign, members of your group or people across your state write emails carrying the same or similar messages with unique details. Letter-writing campaigns can also be effective during legislative sessions when a bill related to foster care arises. The more responses received, the more likely policy makers will be to respond with decisions that support your experiences.

A great way to get the word out and ask a large group to participate in a calling or letter-writing campaign is to use a technology platform designed for this purpose. For example, grassroots advocacy platforms can help you design emails and infographics, and even send mass texts or emails that automatically connect constituents to their legislators. This makes sending out an action alert quick and simple, which is important when a bill is moving and action is needed quickly.

If these platforms seem too complicated or expensive for your organization or group, you might want to check with other like-minded organizations. If your state has a coalition of organizations who serve children or families, they may have a system for sending out alerts to people who are interested in your issues. These connections can be invaluable for mobilizing the grassroots to help with your advocacy.

SAMPLE PHONE SCRIPT

"Hello, I am [name], a constituent in Representative/Senator [name]'s district. I am calling to speak with Representative/Senator [name] about the importance of [your specific issue related to foster care]. Family is essential to a child's development. Economists, business leaders, and researchers agree that supporting high-quality foster parents is among the best public investments we can make. By supporting our foster parents, we can give children the chance to succeed and become productive adults.

I ask that you vote in support of legislation that [your specific issue] because it will help improve the lives of children and families in [name of town/city/state]. Thank you for your hard work."

SAMPLE EMAIL

Dear Representative/Senator [name],

I am writing to talk about the importance of foster parents in our community. As a constituent in your district, I ask that you support legislation to increase support for quality foster parents by [your specific issue].

Research tells us that children who have quality foster parents can better heal from trauma, eventually reuniting with their birth family or achieving permanency with relatives or adoptive parents. When children achieve permanency rather than aging out of care, they are more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to become involved in crime, and more likely to become productive adults.

With this data, and a wealth of personal experience, we know that family is essential to a child's development. Economists, business leaders, and researchers agree that high-quality foster parents are among the smartest public investments we can make.

There are [insert number here] children in foster care in our [state, county] today. Without making improvements to the ability of foster parents to help children, these children will suffer. Please vote in support of [your issue] so that all children in our community will have bright futures.

If you have question or want more information, please feel free to contact me at [your contact information].

Thank you for your hard work!

2. Hold meetings with legislators or their staff

Set up a meeting or series of meetings with legislators to ensure that they fully understand your issue. While scheduling and attending these meetings might seem time-consuming, they are well worth the time and effort. In-person meetings help decision-makers put a face to the issues these legislators deal with and demonstrate your commitment of time and energy. They also help build relationships with legislators, which can help you gain their support. To set up these meetings, identify which legislators you want to reach out to and ask at least one ally or team member who is a constituent of that legislator to schedule a visit. In some cases, your meeting may be with a staff member assigned to that topic of child welfare. Meeting with staff can be a very effective way to get information to the legislator. If you know who the staff member is ahead of time, do some research on that person to learn about their perspectives and how much they may know about foster care.

WHEN MEETING WITH LEGISLATORS OR THEIR STAFF, REMEMBER:

- Before the meeting, practice telling your story.
- Be clear who you will be meeting with and estimating how long you will have to talk.
- Do your research in advance to determine if there is any personal connection for either the legislator or the staff. If you don't find any, ask if they have a personal connection early in the meeting and make connections to your issue.
- Be prompt and patient. Elected officials are busy, and they're often late or interrupted because of their schedule. Be flexible and respectful if changes or interruptions occur. If you meet with a staff member, consider it an opportunity to gain a future ally who serves on your elected official's team!
- Be prepared. Bring information and materials supporting your story and your position so that elected officials can look at something after you leave.
- Ask questions about their positions and what they are working on.
- Be complimentary and appreciative.
- Stay positive and respect all parties, including birth parents, caseworkers, institutional care providers, and children in need.
- Remember: you are the expert.
- Bring family photos, if appropriate. Pictures of children who are affected will help them remember you and what you came to talk about.
- If possible and appropriate, bring a handout explaining your issue and outlining your ask. Limit this to one page or less so it's quick and easy to read.
- Follow up with a brief, personalized thank you.

We know that meeting face-to-face with an elected official can feel daunting. To help ease your anxiety and ensure that you are well-prepared, here's a general agenda for your meeting:

- General introductions: Introduce the legislator or staff person to their constituents and any other meeting attendees by name and hometown.
- Initial thanks: *"Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with us. We're so excited for the opportunity to share some of our experiences as foster parents so that you can have a better understanding about the valuable impact of services and support."*
- Timing: *"How much time do we have with you today?"* After the legislator or staff member gives a general estimate, adjust what you want to say to fit the time allotted. Plan ahead of time how you can cut your presentation if time is short.
- Statement of purpose: *"We're here because we want to show you the amazing impact of foster parents in [state/jurisdiction]. We know that foster care issues are a key area of interest in the state legislature, and we hope that by meeting with you today, you will see us as a resource for you."*
- Additional thanks: *"Before I share my experiences, I would like to thank you again for all that you do to support strong families. Specifically, [identify an issue they have supported]."*

- **Stage setting:** Put your story in context by providing a fact sheet about foster parenting in your state. Try to balance positive with negative. Point out where the state is performing well and point out where the state could make improvements. When you discuss challenges, also propose viable solutions. You may want to include national data to show how your state compares. For factsheets, visit www.childwelfare.gov and www.childtrends.org.
- **Story sharing:** You've already talked about research and statistics; now share your personal experiences so elected officials can put faces and names to the issue. When sharing your story:
 - Keep it under five minutes, focusing on two to four key points.
 - Keep it positive.
 - Keep it informal and familiar.
 - Practice beforehand.
 - Pause for questions.
 - Encourage your team to facilitate discussion.

(Refer to the section on **Telling your Story** for additional information.)

- **Closing:** Connect the facts with your story to finish with a call to action. If you're looking for specific programs and policies, mention how the presence or lack of supports influenced your work as a foster parent and the impact on the children. You may also want to include the cost for implementing the program or policy as well as the potential costs for not implementing the program or policy. If you're looking to build a relationship with the elected official, emphasize the importance of continuing to work for children and families.
- **Questions:** Open up the floor for questions and ask them what their plans are to support foster parents. Close by planning for a follow up and informing them whom they can contact if they have additional questions. If they ask you questions you don't know the answers to, it is fine to tell them you will find the answer and get back to them shortly after your meeting; never guess or make up an answer.

3. Host a legislative open house

By hosting a legislative open house when elected officials are not in session, you can make connections with elected officials and establish yourself as a resource for future child welfare-related issues. At an open house, 6 to 12 foster parents can come together to host a discussion and share their stories over refreshments or dinner. You may be able to get local restaurants to donate food.

4. Invite elected officials to visit your programs

If you're involved with a larger group offering services, inviting elected officials to see that group's work is another great way to make connections and put faces to the issues when legislators are not in session. Check with the group's leadership to see if this is an option. Similar to a legislative open house, this allows policymakers to understand the real-life implications of their large-scale decisions and can help you build lasting relationships. Before the session, make sure staff and any families who will be there are prepared, and let them know what you're trying to accomplish.

On the day of the visit:

- Determine who will be available to welcome and introduce your legislator to children, staff, parents, or any other guests.
- Plan an activity that demonstrates the impact of quality foster parenting and be sure to encourage your official to participate in the activity if possible. For example, you could have parents and children working together on an art project or creating a life book.
- Remember to take photos to use in the organization's newsletter and send to your legislator in a follow-up thank you note.

WHEN PLANNING A LEGISLATIVE OPEN HOUSE IN YOUR HOME OR AT AN ORGANIZATION:

- Find out when your targeted legislator will be in your area.
- Give your legislator sufficient notice by working with their staff members and sending an invitation. Then, confirm the date and time one week in advance. At this time, ask if others will be joining the legislator and inform them if local media will be present.
- Invite parents or organizational staff members to participate if they wish.

5. Organize a parent day at the legislature

Organizing a foster parent day at the legislature or capitol is a larger scale project that allows parents and youth to share their stories and meet directly with their representatives. It requires a larger team, advanced notice, and a lot of planning but can have a big impact. You can hold a brief training or rally and then go on office visits. Be sure that you schedule the visits ahead of time and that you are permitted to use any common areas where you plan to gather. Have informational packets prepared to drop at any offices where you cannot meet with someone, and follow up with a phone call.

6. Plan a visual or artistic display

Colorful displays at the legislature can draw attention to the need for quality foster parenting, and, when paired with legislative visits, can help legislators understand the importance of your initiative. In the past, people have collected shoes, dolls, and teddy bears to represent the number of children in care.

When scheduling a meeting with legislators, an event, an open house, or a visual display, make sure you call the policymakers in advance and...

- Request to speak to the person in charge of the schedule for the legislator you wish to visit.
- Inform the scheduler of the issues you hope to discuss with the legislator, as well as who will be joining you at the meeting.
- Offer several dates and times that you would be available.
- If the legislator isn't available at any of the times you are available for a face-to-face meeting in their office, ask to meet with a staff member who might be knowledgeable about issues related to child welfare, foster care, and parenting.
- After making an appointment or scheduling an event, leave your name and contact information with the scheduler, as well as the names of organizations you are affiliated with.

7. Consider a virtual event with foster parents and legislators

This may allow more people to be involved and make it easier to fit into legislators' schedules since they don't have to leave their offices. A good strategy for a virtual event is to break people into two or three smaller groups where there are at least one or two legislators and some parents in each group. Have a group leader ask the legislator to share their priorities or passions related to child welfare, then invite a few parents to share their priorities and ideas. This can build relationship and help you know which legislators are aligned with your priorities and which might need more information or a different strategy to help them support your plan. Make sure you advertise your event early and often since you may be competing with other virtual events at the same time.

Following Up

Once you've developed a connection with elected officials, you can work to establish yourself or your team as a resource on issues related to foster parenting and child welfare. Plant seeds for long-term relationships by continuing to offer regular, honest, and direct information with their office.

Let them know that you (and your organization, if you have one) are available as a support for other constituents who contact them about foster care issues. Send thank you notes after meetings, photos of families they have helped through policy changes, holiday cards, or other friendly greetings.

GENERAL ADVOCACY TIPS

- Be confident. You are a voter, and your elected officials make decisions that reflect your needs. It's also your constitutional right to petition your government! You also likely know more about these issues than your elected officials do, so see this as an opportunity to educate and build a relationship with a legislator.
- Keep in mind that advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint. It is rare that a bill is introduced and passed in one session.
- Reassess and adjust your strategies as needed.
- Celebrate and share your successes!

3

Working with Executive Branch Officials

The executive branch manages the business of the state, from implementing and enforcing laws made by state legislatures to overseeing state-run programs and services. Advocating with executive branch officials, such as the heads of your child welfare agency; state, county, or city agency leaders responsible for programs such as Medicaid, employment, and the judiciary; as well as members of the governor's cabinet, is crucial to influencing how laws and policies are written and implemented. Many child welfare improvements can be accomplished through agency policy, also referred to as administrative policy, which generally does not require legislative approval and can be much easier to establish and change.

Now that you've developed your advocacy goal and determined that the audience is within your executive branch, here are the next steps to take:

Many child welfare improvements can be accomplished through agency policy, also referred to as administrative policy, which generally does not require legislative approval and can be much easier to establish and change.

1. Learn about the structure and hierarchy of your target agency — both formal and informal

- Ask other advocates and observe at meetings and events to learn who holds formal titles (for example, secretary, commissioner, councilor, alderman, mayor, etc.) and who holds decision-making power (this may not be the same person). Also get to know people at all levels of the organization from front line to agency head. Front line workers and middle managers often have more information about day-to-day operations and policy implementation than those who set the policies. Many jurisdictions also list these officials and their roles on their official website. Many senior positions are political appointments or decisions, so keep in mind they may change at the end of a Governor's term.
- Get to know the gatekeepers of those in power. Most people in high-level positions at an agency or department have a secretary who manages their schedule and communicates on their behalf. Others will have key assistants or aides. Building a strong relationship with these staff members can improve your access to the decision-maker.
- Whenever possible, learn the background of key people in the agency. For example, did they work their way up through the ranks of the organization? Did they come from private industry or another government organization? Do they have a personal connection to foster care or adoption? Sometimes unique information about an individual such as the college they attended, their interests and activities, or a previous employer can help you find common ground upon which you can begin building a relationship.

2. Study agency policies that relate to your issue

Often agency policies are written to implement legislation, so it is important to understand how the law and the policies intersect. Agency policy can take many forms, such as official agency memos, administrative handbooks, strategic or programmatic plans, etc. Some agencies make policy information readily available online; in other cases, it is more challenging to find. However, agency policy and common practice of the staff may not always align, and common practice of the staff may vary from office to office, so understanding how the agency functions in real time is critical. Many advocates have successfully achieved their goals through insisting that existing policies are adhered to, rather than demanding changes to policy.

3. Learn the best ways to get involved

Does your target agency host stakeholder meetings or have an advisory board? Are there informal meetings you could join such as provider meetings, workgroups, or committees? What projects is the agency working on that you could help with?

4. Schedule a meeting with agency decision-makers

- Figure out the players at the agency who are making decisions on these issues. Consider the chain of command and be careful to engage the right people or you could upset someone important. If you're not sure who is in charge, ask others at the agency.
- Once you've identified the decision-makers you need to target for advocacy, contact their scheduler to request a meeting to discuss your issue. It may take some time to schedule, but you should be given a time to meet.
- Be clear about what it is that you want the agency to change in relation to your issue. Does that change require policy amendments? Staff training or monitoring? Greater transparency or increased community involvement in decision-making?
- Prepare your ask by looking at data, policies, and gathering stories of other foster, adoptive, and/or kinship parents. Make sure your ask is tangible, achievable, and presented to the person or office with authority to grant it. Also consider the funding, staff, and other resources it will require.
- Prior to your meeting, develop an agenda to guide you through the meeting and help you stay focused. Include a clear statement of the problem and your proposed solution.
- Share your agenda with the officials when you arrive at the meeting. They may also come with their own agenda. When possible, try to keep your discussion on topic. Stay positive and respectful when talking about all parties, including birth parents, caseworkers, institutional care providers, and children in need. Be sure to listen carefully to what others say to learn their perspective and discover how you might influence them. In some cases, they may offer an alternative solution that meets your end goals.
- Advise the officials from the beginning that the results of this meeting will be shared with others. In fact, it's a good idea to put everything you do in writing. Before ending the meeting, ask when you can expect to hear a response.
- If the officials are not receptive to your idea, you have some decisions to make about how you move forward. Keep in mind that they often bear most of the responsibility for implementing laws and policies as they see fit, so you want to do whatever you can to

get them to support your ideas. There is a time and place for pushing forward in the face of opposition. Other times you'll get farther by compromising and working with them in making incremental steps toward your goals. Either way, you'll want to try to find a way to work with them before you go forward without their support.

- After considering their position and your options, if you feel it best to move forward on your issue, you can tell them that. You may even let them know that you'll pursue other options (such as going to your legislator or the media) if you can't find a way to work together. Be sure to remain respectful, even if you are not getting the response you hoped for.
- If you decide you'd like to take more time to find a way to work with the agency, try asking for a small part of your goal. For example, if your goal is to have the department establish a foster/kinship parent advisory council and they're not interested, you could suggest quarterly or semiannual meetings between administrators and a group of parents as a first step toward that goal. This gives you time to strengthen your relationship with the officials, gather additional data about the needs of parents and reasons for an advisory council, and begins the process of officials hearing directly from foster and kinship parents.
- Consider all offers from administrators. If you are invited to sit on a committee (commission, task force, blue ribbon panel, etc.), make sure it's the right fit for you. Joining such groups can be a great way to build relationships or gather background information, but it can also delay action or take time you don't have.

5. Follow up

As promptly as possible, send an email to thank the officials you met with for their time and consideration of your issue. Be sure to include agreements that were made and next steps to be taken. Let them know that if you haven't heard back from them in the timeframe they provided, that you will reach out to them for an update. If it doesn't appear that they intend to address the issue, you can inform them what your next steps will be. These next steps could be reaching out to the media or to state legislators. You can refer to the separate guide **Moving Messages: Employing Media Strategies in Your Foster Parent Advocacy** and to the **Working with Legislators** section of this toolkit for guidance on taking these next steps.

Don't forget that it's an important advocacy strategy to stay involved even when you don't have an ask. If you're available to help administrators when they need, it helps build your relationship and strengthen future advocacy. It may also help you be an even better information resource on other foster, adoption, or kinship issues.

4

Telling Your Story

Now that you have identified your advocacy goal and determined your audience, the next step is preparing to strategically share your story to help achieve your advocacy goal.

Personal stories have incredible power to spur change. They engage policymakers and give them someone to fight for — a person, not just an idea or a policy. If you paint an effective picture through your story, policymakers will remember you and the story when similar issues come up in the future.

To be most effective, you'll need to choose what you tell and how you tell it.

Choose What to Cover

First and foremost, you have to think about how your story — or a story of someone you know — fits with what you're trying to achieve. If you're working to build funding for peer support, you might tell a story about how learning parenting strategies from another caregiver helped your child do better. If you are advocating for a role in decision-making, your story might focus on things you've known about the child in your care that were overlooked when decisions were made — and how your child suffered as a result.

As you prepare your story, consider the following related to what you'll cover.

- Make sure you present your goal in terms of how it will help children, even if what you are advocating is support for parents.
- Protect your children and yourself. Only share what you are comfortable with and refrain from disclosing intimate details about your child's life, unless it's absolutely necessary to achieve your advocacy goal. If something feels too personal, you can tell it in third person — ***"One family went through"*** And you can always change the names to protect your children and family.
- Limit your story to under five minutes, focusing on two or three main points. Consider including:
 - A few details that will make them care about your child and see them in their mind; be sure to show the love you feel
 - The challenge(s) you are or were facing and how it affected your child
 - How a policy change would make things better for your child and children like them
 - How many other children or families are affected by this issue
- Be specific enough to paint a picture but don't get bogged down by details. It's the big picture that your audience will be most interested in.
- Don't assume that others understand foster care or adoption, but accept that they don't need to for you to succeed. Use plain, positive language and avoid jargon and acronyms. Say: ***"Children need families."*** Instead of *"Children should be placed in the least restrictive setting."* Rather than talking about *"congregate care,"* use terms like *"unable to live with their*

parents," "group care," or "children who aren't in a family." Or explain, in concrete terms, what you are talking about. About "least restrictive placements," one could say: **"There is a law that requires all children and youth live in environments that allow them to have the most opportunities possible — meaning a family before a group home."**

Make It Personal

- Talk about your children as individuals. Use their first names or nicknames and talk about things they like to do. Talk about joys as well as challenges.
- Be careful to protect your child's privacy and don't divulge too much, especially if you're at a public event or the media is present.
- Use friendly, familiar language and personalize family members you are referring to. (Talk about "his brother Joshua" rather than "his sibling"; "my husband Tony" rather than just saying "my husband.") Occasionally use the words kids and teens instead of children and youth.
- Tell stories that paint a picture about real children or families to make their needs and experiences come alive. Compare these examples: **"Tyrone was separated from his sister Tiffany when they were placed in a group home, but they were able to be reunited when they went to live with their grandma. Too many children like Tyrone and Tiffany lose connections with their brothers and sisters when they aren't placed with a family."** That's much more effective than "In group care, siblings are separated more often than in kinship or foster care."
- Talk about family dinners or events, sibling relationships, and how you help your children with school or other challenges.
- Make the connection between children who need care and the children your audience knows and loves: **"For children who can't live at home, we want just what you'd want if you couldn't care for your child — a family who loves them and will care for them forever" or "Children in foster care are just like your children — they have strengths, skills, and fears. They often, though, need extra help to overcome the trauma they have experienced in their young lives."**

Be Positive, Respectful, and Inclusive

- Use child-first language. When you talk about disabilities, refer to the child first (say "my daughter was diagnosed with ADHD" rather than "my ADHD daughter"). Children are much more than their disability and this shift in language reflects that. Similarly, use the words **child in foster care** rather than foster child and talk about **children at risk of abuse** rather than at-risk children.
- Speak about the challenges you face but emphasize that meeting challenges is what parents do. Remind policymakers that you are like other parents committed to meeting their children's needs. Let them know you just need the support you're advocating for to help your children thrive.
- Be mindful of how you talk about children and youth, emphasizing the fact that they and their families face challenges due to the trauma and loss they have experienced, not through any fault of their own. Use language such as: **"Parents often face serious**

challenges when their children have been deeply affected by trauma.” “Trauma can have a lifelong effect on children, including on behaviors, physical and mental health, and the ability to form healthy relationships.” “Many parents need support to address their children’s mental health challenges or difficult behaviors.” Never use phrases like “damaged children” or “difficult children.”

- Be hopeful. Give examples of how finding loving, supportive families can and has helped children and youth recover from past hurt and trauma.
- Make it clear that supports and services help children and youth heal from past trauma and make a tremendous difference for families.
- Be respectful of your child’s birth family members and social workers.
- Value all types of families and be careful not to pit one group against another. When talking about the need for permanency, remember to show respect for the foster parents providing temporary care. When advocating for foster parents, be careful not to talk about relatives who haven’t stepped forward or birth parents who failed their children. If your focus is on relative care, don’t talk about saving children from foster care or talk about avoiding placements with strangers. For example, you might say: **“Foster parents provide an amazing service for children who need temporary care, but children need the permanency of placement with relatives or adoption if they can’t return home.”** Or **“When a child can’t live with her birth parents for a little while, she needs another family who can provide her with love and care and work toward getting her home again.”**

Maximize Your Impact

- Practice, practice, practice. Take notes about what you would like to share and practice, ideally, in front of an audience of friends or family once you’ve become comfortable telling your story on your own.
- Use pictures to build a connection. Bring family photographs, which can help illustrate that children in care are just like any other children. Showing a youth surrounded by siblings and family reminds policymakers about what we’re trying to accomplish.
- Incorporate data into your story. The most powerful messages combine stories of real children and families with data that shows these kids and their parents are much like many others. People connect with the stories, but data may be more likely to convince them that there’s a large issue to address. For example: **“Billy lived in three different group homes before aging out of care without a family to care for him. Now he has no family members to invite to his wedding and no home to go to for Thanksgiving dinner. He is not alone — nationally more than 20,000 youth age out of care each year with no family to care for them and to rely on.”**

5

Building a Network

Every time you find yourself in a room with other people, each person there has valuable resources that can help you grow and help further your work. Some have experiences you've never had, others have skills or expertise you don't have or would like to develop, still others have a connection or information that you may need access to. One key to successful advocacy is in having and using a strong network so you can share and tap into those resources.

Every time you find yourself in a room with other people, each person there has valuable resources that can help you grow and help further your work.

Know and Use Your Network

Start by thinking about who is already in your network. This includes virtually everyone you know, but especially anyone with information or expertise that can help you reach your goals. You'll want your network to include strategists, experts, mentors, and peers. Be sure to also think about the people who provide support and encouragement for you when you need it most. Imagine that your goal is to start a state association of foster and adoptive parents to work toward system change in your child welfare system. Think about anyone you know who:

- Has ever started a nonprofit
- Has worked with a membership organization
- Knows anyone in your jurisdiction's child welfare agency
- Works with foster and/or adoptive parents
- Works with legislators or other policymakers
- Has experience working for or with the media
- Has experience with system advocacy — even if it's not related to child welfare
- Other expertise you feel would be helpful

Next, contact those people and ask to schedule a call or a meeting. Many people will appreciate being asked to share their expertise or insights and will be happy to speak with you. Before that meeting, think about what you'd like to know from them, jot down a few questions or "asks" if you can. Maybe you want to ask about the process of starting a nonprofit, or ask about the best way to engage members in an organization. Maybe you'll want to ask them to help you connect with someone in the child welfare agency or to share your information with foster and adoptive families they know. Begin the meeting by catching up since the last time you talked, and then explain your vision for your association. Let them talk and share their expertise, and then make your ask at the appropriate moment.

It can also be a good idea to take this opportunity to ask what this person might know about history of various policies or organizations, or even if they can share any background about a particular person you need to work with. The people in your network can be a rich source of information and background that may help you both move forward with your goals and avoid missteps along the way.

Expand Your Network

If you're not sure your network includes people with the expertise and skills you feel you need, it's time to look at expanding your network. It's always important to remember that your network includes not just the people you know, but also the people they know. Of course, it's harder to know who that might include.

Sometimes expanding your network will happen on its own. As you meet with people in your network and share your vision, often they will offer to connect you with someone they know who could help. If they don't make that offer, you can ask. For example, *"Do you know anyone who works with Senator Smith?"* Or *"Do you have any connections in our child welfare agency?"* You can also ask if you can attend some meetings with them until you get more established in your role. They may be attending meetings you have not been invited to and could help you get connected to key people at the meeting.

You'll also want to expand your own network. Here are some creative ways to meet people outside of your existing network:

- **Prioritize the time immediately before and after meetings.** When attending an in-person meeting with policymakers or advocates, the most important part of the meeting is the 10 minutes after it adjourns. Arriving at the meeting a few minutes early can give you an opportunity to meet people one on one, get the lay of the land, and observe the relationships others have built. During the meeting, notice anyone who speaks on topics you care about or mentions information that piques your interest. As soon as the meeting adjourns, take the opportunity to speak to these people one on one. You may find that you have to prioritize because some people will leave more quickly than others. One strategy is to begin with the person you think you are least likely to see at other events. Another is to ask someone who is leaving for their card so you can follow up at a later time. This is your chance to introduce yourself, exchange business cards, and arrange to continue the conversation.
- **Attend receptions, coffee gatherings, and other networking events.** Attend a broad array of events, even those that aren't related to child welfare. For example, there may be a young professionals organization in your area, a political fundraiser, or a meeting about a particular issue. All of these are opportunities to meet people who could help grow your network. At these events, be sure to mingle and talk to several people. If you can, find the "connector" in the room — the person who seems to know everyone and who is making a lot of introductions. Get to know this person and soon they will introduce you to everyone in the room.
- **Take opportunities to hang out.** If you have down time between meetings or people are going out to lunch or for coffee after work, tag along and take the time to talk about work and about things outside of work. Get to know people as individuals, not just as their title. This helps to make a more personal connection and they may introduce you to others during these times as well.

- **Make time to strengthen relationships.** If there are people you'd like to get to know better or want to build a stronger relationship with, finding times to get together with them is a good strategy. Simply inviting them to meet with you over lunch or coffee can be a good first step toward strengthening the connection you have. Another option is to invite a few people for coffee hour after work. This is an opportunity for you to get to know them more personally, and to ask them to connect you with anyone else who might be able to help you meet your goals. Over time, maintaining this relationship with periodic meetings, phone calls, and emails can help you build support for your goals, gain influence, and further expand your network.

A strong network that you use regularly can help advance your advocacy goals and provide new opportunities for growth and support going forward. Strategic use of your network should be a part of every advocacy campaign you undertake.

Tips for Virtual Networking

During the pandemic, networking became much harder as many people began to work from home, community events were canceled, and meetings moved to virtual formats. If you find yourself attending a lot of virtual meetings or events, the following tips can help maximize those opportunities for networking. These ideas will also be effective when networking with people outside your local area.

- **Note who is attending the meeting and watch the chat for introductions if the host requests them.** If someone says something you want to follow up on or you notice an organization you'd like more information about, following up with an email after the meeting is a great way to begin the dialogue. If you don't have that person's email address, you can try asking the event host or someone else you know who attended if they will connect you. Often you can also find email addresses using a web search for the person's name and organization.

A brief email introducing yourself and inviting the person to talk with you via phone or video is an effective way to begin to build a relationship. If you don't think you'll be able to get the person's email address, you can also try sending a private message to the person during the meeting you are both attending. A simple message saying you'd like to talk with them and giving them your email address will allow you to follow up later.

- **Consider virtual meet-ups.** In-person lunch and coffee meetings may not be an option if you are building relationships with people outside your local area. In these cases, virtual coffee or other social gatherings can be a useful strategy. Some people don't like eating on video but meeting online for coffee is a good way to connect on a more personal level than in a formal meeting.

Similarly, gathering a small group of people who have something in common for a virtual event in the evening provides an opportunity for both social and professional conversation after work hours. Scheduling these types of events periodically can yield a great deal of information and can help to keep you and your goals in the minds of people who are able to help you achieve your goals.

6

Relationship Building

To be successful at advocacy — indeed, at most things in life — one of the most important skills you can cultivate is building relationships. When you take the time to build and maintain relationships with people in key positions, those connections often become the foundation of building support for your goals and plans. So how do you build these relationships?

- **First, think about the relationships you have now.** Whether you realize it or not, you already have a network of relationships you've built over time. These are people you keep in touch with, spend time with, and share your thoughts and ideas with. We maintain these relationships by finding ways to work together, continuing important conversations, and learning about each other over time.
- **Remember, they are just people like you!** Building relationships with policymakers, government officials, members of the media, and others you will interact with while advocating happens in much the same way as other relationships. Don't be intimidated by titles or power dynamics. These are all people who have goals and need help just like you. Most people you will encounter while advocating will be grateful for your knowledge and wisdom about child welfare, a topic they may know very little about. Be strategic in thinking about who to build relationships with to have the best chance of increasing support for your ideas and decreasing opposition. You will need to build relationships with both those who support and oppose your goals.
- **Do your research.** Whenever possible, learn anything you can about influential people before you interact with them. Are you advocating for a piece of legislation that will be discussed in the Senate Health committee? Learn what you can about the chair, the vice chair, and key members of their staff. Most elected officials have biographies online and often articles written about them. Staff may be harder to learn about, so ask others you know who may have interacted with them. When gathering this information, focus on anything you have in common, even if it's unrelated to child welfare. Look at things like their education, occupation, where they live, and their community affiliations or hobbies and find things you have in common. Did the chair graduate from your alma mater? Do you and the vice chair share a love of scouting, sports, or German Shepherds? Use these details to find common ground and shared experiences you can build on. Pay special attention to anyone who has experience with the child welfare system, whether as a former foster youth, a foster, kinship, or adoptive parent, or as a professional who worked in the system.
- **Seek common ground.** Start building a new relationship by listening. Make an appointment with a legislator or other person of influence and ask them what their priorities and concerns are. Ask for their ideas and really listen. Listen to understand and to find common ground, not to refute or discredit. If you're advocating in a partisan environment, some people will have ideas that may seem outrageous to you. Remember

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that they probably don't know the system as well as you and try to find something in their plan that you can support, even if it's something small like hiring more social workers, reducing caseloads, or improving prevention services. Relationships are rarely, if ever, built on disagreement and argument, so now is the time to support what you can and accept what you can't. There may be opportunity later to discuss other ideas or explain why their ideas may be ill-advised.

If their ideas or plans don't seem clear or relevant, and especially if they don't align with your goals, ask lots of questions. Ask for clarification and for more detailed information. Ask to see written plans or documents if they have any. Ask who else they're working with, who opposes the idea, and how they plan to fund it. Take notes if you're able so you'll remember these details later as they will be important for your advocacy strategy.

If you don't entirely support their ideas, don't lie and say that you do, but don't openly oppose them either. Offer support for what you like and share some of your own ideas that align with even a tiny part of their plan. For example, let's say that the chair of the health committee believes the state should put more resources into residential treatment facilities for youth with mental health needs, especially those in foster care. You may oppose this idea with every fiber of your being, but perhaps you can support making sure that treatment programs are of the highest quality. *"Madam Chair, how can we make sure that when children receive treatment, we are monitoring the programs and practices to ensure they are high quality and evidence-based?"*

If you can't find anything to support in their idea, simply listen and take the opportunity to learn about their opinions and perspectives as this will be valuable information going forward. When it's your turn to talk, redirect the conversation to topics you think you'll find more common ground with. *"I appreciate your perspective on providing resources for residential treatment facilities, have you considered ways we can prevent children from experiencing the trauma that can lead to placement in residential facilities?"* Or use data, stories from parents and youth, or trends from other states to raise a new idea or suggestion. *"Chairwoman Jones, thank you for sharing your ideas. National data shows that while some children do need in-patient care for a time, all children do best in family settings. I'd love to share some ideas with you about how we can support families caring for children in their homes."*

- **Follow up.** After any meeting or phone call, be sure to follow up. At the very least, send an email thanking them for their time and offering your assistance in the future. If you shared research or information from other states or federal legislation, be sure to include that in your follow-up email. As you continue to support your ideas with data, examples, and stories from parents and youth, policymakers will see you as a credible resource and will begin to come to you for information and feedback. As your relationship grows and strengthens, you will find that you can be more forthcoming with your opinions because trust has been built over time.
- **Show gratitude.** If a policymaker does something you particularly appreciate, be sure to take the time to thank them. A handwritten thank you note means a lot in a time when most communication is rapid and impersonal. Carrying note cards with you so you can jot a quick note when you have some down time is a great strategy. Also be sure to publicly acknowledge them whenever possible, including via social media. When someone goes above and beyond, homemade baked goods, a picture or note from your child, or offering to help with another initiative they care about are great ways to express thanks and strengthen your relationship. Always be conscious of lobbying rules and spending limits on personal gifts.

- **Be available.** As you continue to get to know people in positions of influence, a key to strengthening your relationship is to begin to share more about yourself. Talk about your children or spouse, the vacation you went on, or the challenges of caring for your aging parents. Appropriate personal sharing opens the door for them to share their own personal stories and this shared vulnerability will strengthen your relationship more than simply sharing professional ideas. Also take opportunities to “hang out” with and around people you want to build relationships with. Whether it’s having lunch, sitting in their office before or between meetings, or attending meetings with them, you will learn invaluable information about their work, their positions, and their personal lives in these times.
- **Keep it going.** Finally, be sure to maintain the relationship. If you have periods where you aren’t working with someone, take the time to send an occasional email and ask how they’re doing and what new projects they’re working on. Request a meeting or lunch to share new projects that you’re working on that could be beneficial to them or where they could help. Sending holiday cards, invitations to events, and maintaining social media connections are also ways to maintain the relationship so it will still be strong the next time you work together.

Having strong relationships with influential people is a key to moving forward with your advocacy goals. Taking the time to build and maintain those relationships can help to reform child welfare and build a movement that leads to positive change.

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Conclusion

We hope you are feeling empowered and inspired to begin your advocacy journey! Not unlike the experience of foster parenting, you will likely hit bumps in the road as you advocate and will need to be persistent and to try out different strategies and approaches. It is one of the many reasons that foster parents are well prepared to be effective advocates!

If you're looking for additional resources, be sure to check out:

- Fostering CHAMPS: fosteringchamps.org
- NACAC:
 - nacac.org/advocate/how-to-advocate
 - nacac.org/resource/building-your-advocacy-toolkit-webinars/
- Community Toolbox: ctb.ku.edu/en
- Child Welfare Information Gateway — Advocating for Families: childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/caseworkpractice/advocating-for-families/