



**Summary of the 2019**

**Community Conversations Regarding Youth and Caregiver Perspectives**

**Of the Connecticut Network of Care**

Between January 2019 and April 2019, a replication of the Community Conversation process was completed to gather input from families and youth regarding the Network of Care in Connecticut. A total of 38 conversations including 343 adults and 149 youth were facilitated by the Family Systems Managers from FAVOR. Family Systems Managers are family members who provide leadership and support to the development of the local, regional and statewide integrated family-driven network of care. As was done in 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2018 participants were asked the following questions:

1. **What are the strengths of Connecticut’s service system for children and families?** 
   1. What is working well?
   2. What needs are being met?
   3. In what ways are services accessible for families? Do people know about the services that are available?
2. **What are the major areas of concern within Connecticut’s service system for children and families?**

a. What is missing from our system?

* 1. What needs are not being met?
  2. What are some of the barriers families encounter when trying to access appropriate services?
  3. Which populations within our communities experience greater difficulties accessing services? (ask about: race/ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation/identity)

1. **How should we fix these problems? What are your suggestions to improve our system of care?** 
   1. How would you like the system to work?
   2. What services are most important so that all of our children and families have the supports they need?
   3. What do we need to do to improve access to care for all of Connecticut’s children and families?

Information from the Community Conversations was gathered through careful notes taken by network of care staff and then analyzed using standard procedures for analyzing qualitative data (Krueger, 1994); data was coded, aggregated and synthesized by FAVOR Family Systems Managers with support from an evaluator at Yale University. Only comments made by participants across different meetings or by consensus of one group of participants are included in the summary. Thus, not everything said in the community meetings were included in the results.

**2019 Community Conversations Summary**

**Strengths of the Network of Care**

***Community Resources.*** Families report local churches, police departments, and programs are helping families fill in the gaps in getting their basic needs met. Eye screenings, soup kitchens, thrift stores, and some shelters are available in different communities. Police are willing to collaborate with families who have special needs; training was provided to educate police officers on developing an informed response with special needs children. The police department has implemented a Junior Program for youth interested in becoming police officers. The police department has access to schools through their computers, police cars, and office and are able to respond to school crisis.

***Quality of Services****.* Programs geared to service the child and family benefit the whole family. Families value service providers that listen and keep families informed. Programs that help the LGBTQ population in a public and vocal way helps to raise awareness. Youth find value in programs that help build life skills, problem-solving skills, peer support, and inclusion in treatment planning (D.C.F Youth Advisory Board, Our Piece of the Pie, New Milford Youth Agency). Families report there are programs that are helpful to Spanish speaking families as they are able to provide services, space for survivors of domestic violence, and help with housing and providing basic needs.

***Family Support*.** Parents and caregivers report service programs are trying to work together with families to provide support and give information. Youth value services and information that help foster parents understand the child. Caregivers and families report faith-based organizations are working in support of families to assist in referrals for doctors, summer programs, and daycare. Family support groups (e.g. Hang Time, Elm City, and FEEL) are helpful, informative, and bring families together as a supportive network.

***School Resources.*** Caregivers and families report resources (e.g., afterschool programs, school-based health centers, social workers, etc.) offered by some schools are very helpful and beneficial to families and their children. Youth report community collaboration between school and community (e.g., Urban League, future business owner clubs and stock club) helps students find opportunities that match what they are interested in and enable youth as early as 16 years of age to gain internships. Parents spoke highly of schools that made sure to include information in Spanish and find value in family engagement activities (e.g., PTO fundraisers, dine out night, school store emporium and school board beautification projects).

***School Communication.*** Youth report that when guidance counselors listen and support their college prep process, youth feel more assured about graduating. Youth indicate that schools that have technical programs (culinary, driver’s education, youth leadership) help with communication between students, administration, and department heads.

***School Culture.*** Families and caregivers report positive results when families are involved in special needs, team building, and resource sharing events. Youth report there are benefits to having school ‘cultural’ events. Youth describe school cultural events as a time when they are seen as individuals rather than a number.

***Department of Children and Families*.** Families identify D.C.F services such as secured housing, voluntary services, transportation, and accessible social workers as helpful and important to enrolling kids in programs.

**Resources Needed**

***Community Resources.*** Families expressed a need to have more community involvement opportunities (e.g., fundraisers and food events) where information and resources can be shared. There is a need for service materials to be printed in Spanish and additional supports for men. There is a high need for communities to have shelters, housing, and veteran support. Families do not feel that housing supports are well organized and report that some shelters are not kept in good condition or maintained for adequate accommodation. In some areas, faith-based centers are missing at community collaborative tables and families would like for faith-based centers to become familiar with system language and develop a narrative and language to better support families and offer information.

***Access to services.*** Families and caregivers report a lack of support services and long wait lists (autism, intellectual disabilities, dual diagnosis, and mental health) for youth and young adult 21 years of age. Families are in need of outpatient therapy and challenged by medication management services unable to service when the youth does not readily participate in the therapy sessions. Families would like to see better coordination of services specifically addressing language barriers and services that involve the family and their children.

***Quality of School Staff:*** Families report there is a need to improve communication between staff and parents. Families want to be included on conversations supportive of their child without having to include the administration on emails in order to get a response from their child’s teacher. Families would like to see a selection of diverse staff to better accommodate the needs of bilingual youth and families. Spanish speaking families feel they are experiencing more barriers and are discriminated against by the school staff.

***Youth Support***. Youth report there is a need for LGBTQ services to be made available and accessible for youth people. There should also be consistent mandatory training for staff, administration, parents, and other agencies around LGBTQ specific issues.

***School Structure:*** Youth reported the physical structure of their school does not allow them to feel safe (e.g., panic bars, having the ability to open doors from both sides of the building structure). Youth report school security and structure need to be improved and the inside environment must be cleaned better.

***School safety:*** Families report they do not feel school staff is especially helpful in bullying situations. Students report there are schools where students are bullied by the teachers***.***

***Respect.*** Families report they do not feel respected by the Department of Children and Families when their children are protected by the department. Families would like to feel supported as foster parents and have an understanding of funds available to them to help support the child.

**Structures that Need Improvement**

***Families as Full Partners.*** Families and caregivers would like to have a presence at the Board of Education and SEPTO group meetings to support their family needs. In order to have presence at the meetings thought must be given into childcare and scheduling meetings at different times for families to attend.

***School Safety***. Implementation of policy and safety in schools is effective when families are a part of the conversation. The youth would like to work together with school staff and develop an actual plan or process to keep staff and students safe.

***School Culture***. Students report they feel teachers lack motivation when students look for their teachers for support. Teachers report there is a need for therapeutic support in the school environment.

***School Resources***. Youth suggest schools incorporate more cultural foods in the lunch options and implement consistent delivery time. Inconsistent lunch scheduling leaves some students unable to eat or to have a well-rounded lunch (e.g., milk is missing, food is undercooked, and there is not enough food to serve).

***Youth Education and Support.*** Conversations that youth are inclusive and actively a part of planning in partnership with school staff is beneficial to building honesty and trusting relationships between staff and student. Students find value in having school alumni visit the school to speak on their experiences. Students report there is a need for recruitment and outreach beyond local colleges, students want to see more and better opportunities for colleges.

***Department of Children and Families and Youth Support.*** Youth suggest ongoing information sessions as a resource to help them better navigate the process of finding resources for college. To strengthen their system relationships youth would like have more presence of their D.C.F social worker and it is suggested that D.C.F match youth with mentors and vocational classes when they need them.

***Youth Voice***: Youth suggest more opportunities for communication forums and honest conversations (e.g., school>community>youth) allowing the youth voice to be heard. Youth recommend surveying student populations to better implement a class curriculum that meet the students’ needs and interest.

***Youth Choice***. Students identify opportunities to partner with staff and administration as a process to build trusting relationships and exercise their voice and power. Youth suggest starting youth advisory groups in schools to further connect with positive role models and create opportunities for community service as opposed to in-school suspension and out of school suspension.

***School Climate.*** Students report experiencing bullying, racism, and classism that goes unaddressed in the schools. There is an inconsistency in the procedure as to how administration implements school policy (drugs, arson bullying, and sexual harassment) and students feel stereotyped based on how they look.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONNECTing Children and Families to Care is a statewide initiative to create partnerships among families, state agencies, and service providers at the local, regional and state levels to develop a single-point-of-access or “No Wrong Door” approach to the delivery of children’s services within Connecticut.

We would like to acknowledge the collaboration and contributions of the partnering organizations working on the CONNECTing initiative, as well as, the extraordinary number of local and regional providers and families working on behalf of children with special health and behavioral health care needs.

Our partnering organizations, alphabetically listed, include:

The mission of AFCAMP is to educate, empower and engage parents and community to improve quality of life for children with special needs and others at risk of education inequity or system involvement.

Beacon Health Options serves as the Administrative Service Organization for Medicaid and HUSKY in Connecticut with a mission to help people live their lives to the fullest potential.

The Child Health and Development Institute is a catalyst for improving the health, mental health and early care systems for children in Connecticut with a mission to ensure healthy outcomes for all children in Connecticut by advancing effective policies, stronger systems, and innovative practices.

Working together with families and communities to improve child safety, ensure that more children have permanent families, and advance the overall well-being of children is the central focus of the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

FAVOR INC. is a non-profit statewide, multicultural family-led organization that serves families who have children and youth with mental and behavioral health challenges by providing training, technical assistance, and direct family peer support services.

The State of Connecticut General Assembly Public Acts 13-178 and 15-27 and the PA 13-178 Children’s Behavioral Health Plan Implementation Advisory Board for their planning and implementation role in the behavioral health plan for children.

The Consultation Center at Yale is a university-based organization that offers a range of services, training and research to individuals, organizations, businesses and governmental agencies throughout Connecticut, the U.S. and internationally. The Center’s mission is to promote health and wellness, prevent mental health and substance abuse problems, and enhance equity and social justice.

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