NFYI

NATIONAL FOSTER YOUTH INSTITUTE

LEARNING TO THRIVE TOGETHER

2020 REPORT

MESSAGE FROM CONWAY COLLIS
BOARD CHAIR EMERITUS

It has been my honor to serve as the founding Board Chair of the National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI). NFYI was founded on the premise that all our children deserve to be healthy, fed, housed, loved and supported. To make that goal a reality for foster youth, NFYI works to amplify the voices of current and former foster youth to lead the necessary public education, policy development and advocacy.

Because of the leadership, work and courage of the involved youth who have been part of the child welfare system, NFYI's dedicated staff, and the extraordinarily committed Board of Directors, NFYI's impact continues to increase at the federal level and in states across the country. NFYI's growth as an organization was again demonstrated by its effectiveness this past year as we addressed the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable foster youth while pivoting to the virtual space.

As I step down as Board Chair, I want to thank the current and former foster youth who have trusted and encouraged our involvement, the knowledgeable and dedicated staff now led by our new Executive Director Rebecca Louve Yao and the incredible Board of Directors.

It has been a special blessing to work with each of the Board members; they have become valued friends. I look forward to continuing to work as a Board Member with NFYI and to the many things NFYI will accomplish.

MESSAGE FROM WENDY SMITH
2021 BOARD CHAIR

As I reflect on the unique challenges of 2020, I want to congratulate the staff and the members of NFYI across the country. NFYI adapted in an effective and graceful way to the constraints and demands of the COVID pandemic and its many impacts on system-impacted youth and families—making the turn to virtual communications, organizing, and meetings to continue our efforts to make positive change.

On behalf of the Board of Directors and the entire NFYI community, I want to thank Conway Collis for his leadership of the organization from the day of its founding. Together with our founder, the Honorable Karen Bass, he has been a central force in bringing NFYI to where we are now, playing a critical role in connecting members, staff, board, and government.

I join him in welcoming our new Executive Director, Rebecca Louve Yao, who is new to the job, but not to NFYI, where she previously served as both our National Organizing & Policy Director and Development Director before moving to leadership of the entire organization. As those of you who have worked with her know, she brings knowledge, commitment, and a wonderful energy to her work every day.

In the year ahead, we will maintain and amplify the focus on our core mission of lifting the voices of child welfare involved youth and families to transform child welfare policy and the system itself. We will continue to empower current and former foster youth to be agents of change, and work alongside them to make those changes real.

MESSAGE FROM REBECCA LOUVE YAO
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

What can we say about 2020 that hasn't already been said? Quite a bit, as it turns out. When the pandemic first began, I remember watching in alarm as colleges and universities closed, facilities like group homes locked down, and courts and social workers moved online.The systems that supported current and former foster youth were suddenly closed or more difficult to access.

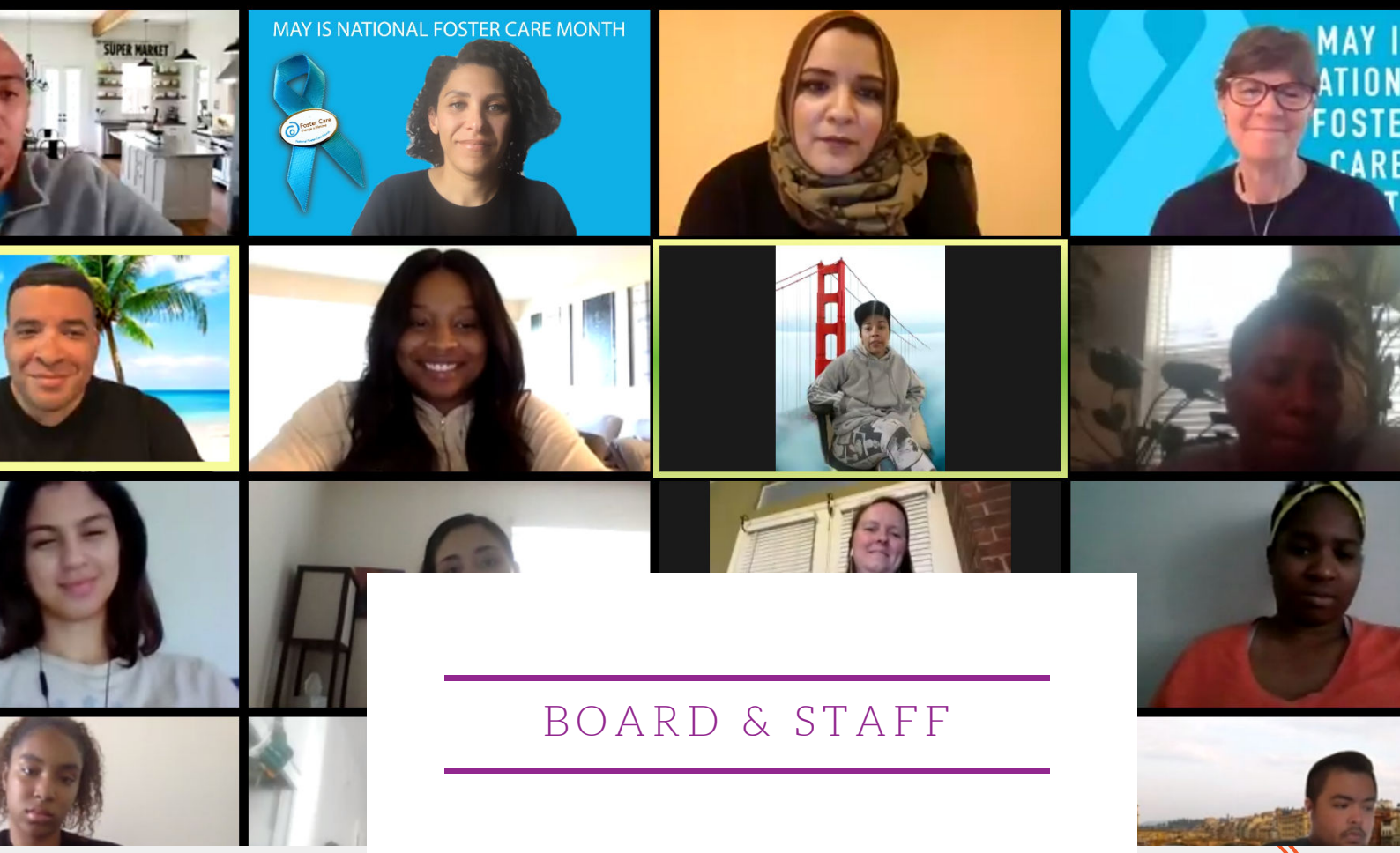
As shutdowns began across the country, NFYI joined members of Congress at a press conference to remind the public that closing dorms and cafeterias put foster youth and recent alumni of care into a precarious situation. From that moment on, we spent the rest of the year sounding the alarm, educating the community about the unique needs of current/former foster youth, working with Congress to ensure that people with experience in the child welfare system were taken into consideration in pandemic relief packages, and supporting our members as they navigated change.

Our goal at NFYI in 2020 wasn't just about this organization surviving in a global pandemic and economic recession, but finding ways to thrive and do better. I believe that's what our goal should be for everyone who has experience in child welfare: not just surviving the system, but getting the resources and support to thrive in the system and beyond.

As I write that, it sounds like a tall order, but if 2020 taught us anything it's that we can learn to thrive together.

Read on to see all that we accomplished in 2020, and I hope that I can count on you to help us do even more this year.

Sincerely,
Rebecca Louve Yao
Executive Director



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FOSTER YOUTH VOICES

After the 2020 Congressional Shadow Day program was canceled, delegates and regional coordinators accepted into the annual event in Washington, DC were invited to participate in the NFYI expansion program, which provided fellowship, more than 20 skills-building seminars, and virtual meetings with legislators. In virtual seminars, participants learned about elections, policy-making, organizing, injustice on Black lives, and received mental health support. They also hosted a series of virtual listening sessions in 16 states. And they worked on drafting six policy recommendations: national standard of care, juvenile justice reform, extending Chaffee and Medicaid after the pandemic, combating the digital divide, foster youth board representation, and extended aging out services. A few participants shared their experiences:

My involvement in NFYI has been nothing but reciprocal and reviving. I think it is safe to say that no one could have anticipated the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, NFYI staff led all of us delegates in a compassionate, culturally competent manner. In this organization, people are always first - checking in, reaching out, and helping in whatever ways needed. Moreover, I was excited to learn about the opportunity to continue the work we began in the spring through the expansion program. The continued collective was uplifting and energizing in more ways than one: it afforded all of the us the opportunity to continue learning about the intricacies of federal politics, it provided an expansive, national network of child welfare stakeholders with whom we frequently collaborated, and it provided us resources that contributed to our holistic growth. None of this even begins to touch upon the relationships that formed from this incredible group of like-minded individuals. All in all, I'm grateful for NFYI and its Expansion Program - it was one of the few good things to come from this unprecedented pandemic!

- Ivory Bennett, Texas

NFYI was super smart in inventing the expansion program during Covid-19 to still keep current and former foster youth busy with policy work during this ongoing pandemic. I love that Zoom and Google Meet were available so us foster youth could do some important work even if it was virtual over the camera. Attending Town Halls with different Senators, legislators and Assemblymembers across the nation made me feel important, heard and taken seriously. Having different events like: HeartMath, vision board and much more to help with our well-being is great for our sanity. Having self-care wellness skill webinars was amazing! I love that there are people who I have never met besides Zahra who care about us young folks. I love NFYI and that I was privileged to be a part of this virtual 2020 Expansion Program.

- Sabrina Abong, California

Being admitted to the NFYI Expansion Program, I knew I would develop into a stronger advocate for foster youth. However, the support and opportunities I gained from completing our activities went beyond my wildest expectations. I was able to engage with various Members of Congress to make foster youth's needs heard and push for foster care legislation. I am also deeply humbled that NFYI opened the door for my story to be featured in a major newspaper, which provided a platform to share my own recommendations on improving the system. I will never forget the impact I was able to make thanks to the experiences I had in my first year with NFYI, and I'm truly excited for many more!

- Japh Kariuki-Ebanks, Florida

2020 IN REVIEW

NFYI Chapters: NFYI currently has four local chapters where current/former foster youth focus on organizing and advocating in their own communities. The Los Angeles Chapter hosted a paid Organizing Internship and provided participants with a deep awareness of government processes and functions; jurisdictional relationships associated with child welfare policy; and campaign development and advocacy training that prepared interns for peer mobilization efforts. Interns met with Councilmembers Mike Bonin and Marqueece Harris-Dawson and planned for a large-scale City Hall event to acknowledge National Foster Care Month. They also met with the staff of U.S. Senator Kamala Harris to discuss national policy priorities. And they cemented NFYI's relationship with the Department of Children and Family Services.

The LA Organizing Interns had many professional and personal successes. Overcoming the barriers of housing, transportation, healthcare, childcare and the disruption associated with Covid-19, Los Angeles Organizing Interns demonstrated their commitment to the organization and the passion for the work they were doing.

The New Jersey and Michigan Chapters held more than five community webinars where they discussed the impacts Covid-19 had on TAY education, school resources, and highlighted speakers who work in child welfare. And the DC/Maryland/Virginia chapter launched in 2020 and has been working on outreach to increase chapter membership and build relationships with regional decision makers.

Virtual Town Halls: Once in-person events became impossible to hold safely, NFYI pivoted to virtual seminars and town halls. NFYI hosted 14 Congressional Town Halls with members of the House and Senate representing 12 states. These intimate conversations between legislators and current/former foster youth provided members with a deeper understanding of how our government works and provided lawmakers with first-hand knowledge of how the foster care system actually works.

And the meetings led to real change, including the Dosha Joi Immediate Coverage for Foster Youth Act and the Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act. The last bill was included in the final Covid-19 relief package of 2020. Participants met with:

VIRTUAL TOWN HALL SPEAKERS

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (CA-12)
U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley (IA)
Rep. Don Bacon (NE-02)
Rep. Karen Bass (CA-37)
Rep. Judy Chu (CA-27)
Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (NJ-12)
Rep. Danny Davis (IL-07)
Rep. Jim Langevin (RI-02)
Rep. Brenda Lawrence (MI-14)
Rep. Gwen Moore (WI-04)
Rep. Markwayne Mullin (OK-02)
Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon (PA-05)
Rep. Kim Schrier (WA-08)
Rep. Jackie Walorski (IN-02)

In addition to town halls with legislators, NFYI members also participated in virtual events with influencers like Keyshia Cole and Jason Lee, decisionmakers like LA County Department of Children and Family Services Director Bobby Cagle, and service providers.

ADVOCACY WORKS

"As Chair of the Subcommittee with jurisdiction over child welfare, I am grateful to the foster youth who shared their needs with policymakers during the NFYI Town Halls this year. Foster youth bring the kind of inside expertise and perspective on our child welfare system which only comes from personal experience. They know the reality of foster care, and the best way for Congress to help youth who have experienced foster care is to listen to them. I commend these young people. Their advocacy shaped the key provisions within the bipartisan Supporting Foster Youth and Families during the Pandemic Act, which we are actively working to include in the next Covid-relief package."

- Representative Danny Davis (IL - 07)

"This year's town hall allowed me to directly engage with our foster youth, many of whom had concerns about losing their housing, tuition support, or agency and community connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. I took that information and worked with the Caucus to introduce a bill to allow transition-age youth who are already in foster care and/or participating in the Chafee Program to continue to be served if they age out during the pandemic response."

- Representative Don Bacon (NE - 02)
Co-Chair, Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth

2020 AFTERNOON OF LEARNING & CELEBRATION

This year's Annual Afternoon of Learning & Celebration was virtual, allowing us to be joined by supporters across the country and around the world.

The event was hosted by Theron Ogedengbe and Jenni Pulos and featured original performance art from our members — an entertaining combination of star power and lived experience in the child welfare system. We also honored Jewels and Kiko Washington with the Champion for Children Award.

Not only was this year's event virtual, but we found new ways to use technology to make donating easier for our supporters, incorporating text messaging and a simplified donation page to make contributing fast and easy for supporters. For those who missed the event, it's available online here.

THANK YOU, DONORS

This extraordinary year was made possible by over 350 donors and funders who recognize that investing in the voices and advocacy of current and former foster youth is the most effective thing we can do to make headway in transforming the child welfare system. We are grateful to the following people and organizations who make our work possible:

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Women's Circle

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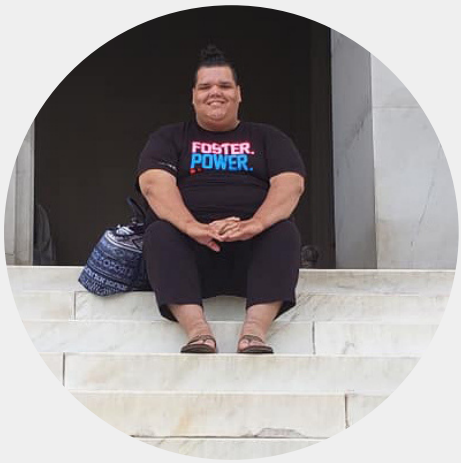
This report is dedicated to the memories of Congressmember John Lewis, Foster Youth Advocate Dosha "DJay" Joi, and Representative Isaac Robinson.



Congressman Lewis was a champion for foster youth, inviting them to shadow him at NFYI's annual Congressional Shadow Day and serving as an inspiring keynote speaker at the Shadow Day luncheon, where he discussed his own work as a youth organizer. DJay was a member of NFYI, a 2019 Shadow Day Delegate, a fighter for children, and inspired the Dosha Joi Immediate Coverage for Foster Youth Act. Michigan State Representative Robinson met with members of NFYI's Michigan Chapter and helped develop their idea of a foster youth caucus to advise Michigan lawmakers. Both DJay and Representative Robinson lost their lives to COVID-19 in 2020.