

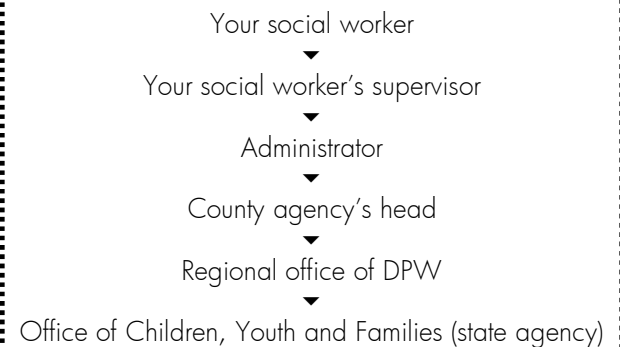
YOUTH RIGHTS IN PENNSYLVANIA: YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE: GETTING YOUR VOICE HEARD

If you are in out-of-home placement (foster home, group home, treatment facility), you have the right to have your voice heard. If you feel your case is not being handled properly, are dissatisfied with your current situation, or do not feel like people are listening to your wants and needs, there are certain steps you can take.

- **Call your social worker.** Your social worker may not know there is a problem unless you tell them about it. Ask your social worker if they can help you make your situation better. Tell your social worker what you would like to see happen. Ask a trusted adult (school counselor, case worker, etc.) to help you make the phone call if you need support.

- **Go up the “chain of command” at the child welfare agency:** If your social worker is not returning your calls or does not respond to your concerns, you can call his or her supervisor. Explain your concerns to the supervisor and see if he or she has any ideas on how to make your situation better. If you still do not feel like your voice is being heard, each children and youth agency has a “chain of command” of supervisors. Continue to reach out to other supervisors within the agency (see chart at right) if the individuals you have contacted are not being helpful.

Chain of Command at the child welfare agency:



- **Lawyer.** In Pennsylvania all youth in out-of-home care (foster care, group home, treatment facility, etc.) are appointed an attorney (called a Guardian ad Litem) to represent the youth in court. You should let your lawyer know if you are dissatisfied with your current situation or your needs are not being met. It is your lawyer’s job to advocate for your wishes and your best interests, so tell your lawyer what you want for yourself (for example, where you will live, what kind of services you will receive, etc.). If you do not know who your lawyer is you should ask your social worker (or their supervisor).
- **Court.** If you are in out-of-home care, your case is reviewed in court at least every 6 months.. Youth should be present at and should participate in these hearings (especially older youth). If you feel like your needs are not being met or are dissatisfied with your current situation, you can voice your concerns in court. The judge has the authority to make changes to your situation if he or she decides the changes are in your best interest.
- **Grievance Process.** If you are in out-of-home care, the children and youth agency as well as any private provider agency involved in your case must have a grievance process in place . When you go into a placement someone should explain to you how to file a grievance or complaint. If you don’t remember how this process works, contact your social worker (or the agency where they work) to find out how to begin the grievance process.

More information about the grievance process:

Under Pennsylvania’s Regulations, the county child welfare agency and all service providers, including foster care agencies, group homes, residential treatment centers, and supervised independent living programs must have a grievance policy. It is required that this policy:

- Is explained to the youth at the time of placement or the beginning of receiving services
- Is provided to the youth in writing and posted in placement facilities
- Makes clear that you will not get in trouble for filing a grievance
- Is easy to understand

There must be documentation in the youth’s file that he or she has been informed of the grievance policy.

(55 Pa. Code §§ 3130.88; 3680.48; 3800.31)

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Resources:

- If you need help advocating for what you want to see happen, there is a helpful form that can be found at http://www.fosterclub.com/files/Request_for_help_form.pdf. This form can help you express your concerns in a clear and concise way and then share these concerns with the people who work with you.
- www.fosterclub.com also has other information that may be helpful to you— many forms and instruction guides can be downloaded for free from this website.

Numbers to Know:

Regional Offices of DPW

Western Region: 412-565-2339

(serving the following counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Cameron, Clarion, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Fayette, Forest, Greene, Indiana, Jefferson, Lawrence, McKean, Mercer, Potter, Venango, Warren, Washington, and Westmoreland)

Central Region: 717-772-7702

(serving the following counties: Adams, Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Centre, Clearfield, Clinton, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lycoming, Mifflin, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Snyder, Somerset, Union, and York)

Northeast Region: 570-963-4376

(serving the following counties: Berks, Bradford, Carbon, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, Wayne, Wyoming)

Southeast Region: 215-560-2249

(serving the following counties: Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia)

State Agency (governing county child welfare agencies):

Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) Helpline: 1-800-692-7462

*Remember: If you are being abused or neglected, please contact Childline. By calling Childline you are requesting that the county children and youth agency respond quickly to your concerns about abuse or neglect. Childline of Pennsylvania can be contacted at: 800-932-0313.



Tips for getting your voice heard:

- **Be polite**— people are more likely to listen to you when you express your concerns in a respectful and polite way.
- **Focus on the issue**— try to focus on the issue that is your main concern, rather than getting sidetracked with things that are less important.
- **Be concise**— be clear and to the point. Try not to get caught up in telling long detailed stories unless they are particularly relevant.
- **Make a record of your attempts to have your voice heard:**
 - **Leave a message**— if you cannot reach the person, leave a voice message with your contact phone number even if you think they have it. Otherwise the person will not know that you called.
 - **Write a letter**—when you put your concerns in writing (and keep a copy) you have proof to show your attempts to be heard.



Juvenile
Law
Center