

# From PLACE TO PLACE

*From Place to Place Community Forum*



## A Step-by-Step Guide

*From Place to Place Community Forum: A Catalyst for Youth Driven Change*

## producers note

While completing my Masters in Social Work at the University of Montana, I ran a Transitional Living Program. During that year I worked with youth who were getting ready to age out of Montana's foster care system on their 18th birthday. It was my job to prepare them to become independent adults. At first, I was intrigued by the challenge, but the honeymoon quickly ended and I realized what a failed enterprise I had entered. It hit me in an instant when a DCFS worker of 25 years said; "this whole aging-out thing is making quite a buzz." My naïve response was, "haven't kids been aging out of foster care forever? Why is it becoming a buzz now? Why are so many kids leaving the system ill prepared and destined to suffer?" It was at that moment that I decided to Listen, Trust and Take Action with the youth I was working with. What emerged was the feature film, *From Place to Place*.

The inspiration came from a conversation with Codie, who is featured in the film. As usual, our conversation meandered until he began telling me his foster care story. He told me he was removed from his mom and siblings 5 days after his 11th birthday. He described the 17 placements he went through in 7 years. He talked about how his Mom was struggling with poverty and he wished the State had helped her get on her feet rather than trying to keep them apart. Then he said the most profound thing, "my life is important and people should know about my story of growing up in foster care. Let's make a movie about my life!" I quickly agreed and said we will call it *From Place to Place*. That was January 2008.

Codie's idea resonated with my belief in the power of youth engagement. I saw the film as an opportunity to work with young people as experts in a system that has so intimately impacted their lives. I began talking with other young people about the film and found interest among Ralyn, Raif and Micah. Micah eventually introduced me to his sister Mandy. As I listened to their stories, a profound theme emerged. They felt lost and silenced by the system and powerless in their ability to determine the outcome of their lives. They were eager to share their stories, but not with just anyone. They wanted to share their stories with people who are in a position to fix America's foster care system. Eventually my Transitional Living Program was cut by the State so my job became producing *From Place to Place*. Codie and I had already met Paige Williams and Porch Productions. So, in the fall of 2008 we began production and the following summer I joined Paige as the co-owner of Porch.

For the past two years we have followed Raif, Mandy, Codie, Ralyn, Kirsten and Micah as they struggle and succeed to make it on their own. *From Place to Place* has helped them to find their voice after being hurt, lost and silenced in a system that was supposed to take care of them. Their goal is to share their stories with people who are in a position to make America's foster care system better. Their hope is that *From Place to Place* will improve the system for the next generation. Two years later, they have achieved their goal and their hope is becoming reality.

Matt Anderson

## what is the facilitators guide?

Why a *From Place to Place* Forum?

How to Engage Youth in *From Place to Place* Forums

*From Place to Place* Forums in Action: From Capitol Hill to Communities

### Planning a Community Forum

- Step 1 Decide sponsorship of the Forum
- Step 2 Choose a Facilitator
- Step 3 Develop Goals and Objectives
- Step 4 Pick a Venue
- Step 5 Determine Costs for the Event
- Step 6 Invite a Diverse Audience to the Forum
- Step 7 Prepare Youth To Tell Their Stories
- Step 8 Organize Materials for the Day
- Step 9 Make it Fun!

### Conducting a Community Forum

- Step 1 Introduce the Short Video
- Step 2 Show the Short Video
- Step 3 Structure a Dialogue

### Creating a Call to Action

- Step 1 Elicit ideas from youth about how to get involved
- Step 2 Ask for audience commitments
- Step 3 Keep Up The Momentum

## Why a from place to place forum?

*From Place to Place*, a movie that depicts the lives of young people in foster care, evokes a range of emotions about how foster care affects youth who have experienced abuse and neglect. The film sends a powerful message about the challenges faced by youth in foster care and those who have left foster care, and the need for a better response for our nation's most vulnerable children.

By itself, *From Place to Place* does not stimulate the kind of commitment to action and change that is needed to make a difference for America's next generation of foster youth. Rather, it is by hearing youth voices in person, face to face and in one's own community, that the true message of *From Place to Place* can be heard and felt. The power of the film, in combination with a facilitated dialogue, confronts audiences with the reality that although the young people in the film might be from "somewhere else", they exist in every community in America. Recognizing this reality is the first step toward taking individual and collective action for change.

Yet recognition of the problem is not enough. To maximize the potential for *From Place to Place* to be a catalyst for change, Porch Productions is developing a series of media based products that can be used at the grass roots level to give youth a voice and promote lasting change. In addition to this facilitators guide, these products include the feature film, which will initially be screened at film festivals around the country and then aired on cable and/or network television. The feature film is also available for sale for private and public/educational use. The short version of the film is also available for sale for private use. It has already been used all over the country to orient volunteers, train professionals, educate students, and advocate for improvements to policy and programming. Porch is also in the early stages of using the film to develop an online course curriculum for university students and professionals. We believe it is the energy of young people, combined with commitment from people in communities where our nation's foster children live, that will ultimately change the course of America's foster care system and improve the lives of thousands of children.

### TOWARD THIS END, PORCH PRODUCTIONS ENCOURAGES SPONSORSHIP OF *FROM PLACE TO PLACE* FORUMS THROUGH THE COUNTRY TO ACCOMPLISH THREE MAJOR GOALS:

- + To build awareness about the plight of youth in the foster care system and those who leave the foster care system without a permanent family
- + To give youth a forum to share their experiences and a chance to be a part of the solution
- + To create a sense of urgency and action with a diverse group of stakeholders to play a meaningful role in achieving permanency for youth

We have created this Facilitator's Guide to support sponsorship of *From Place to Place* Forums wherever there is a passion for engaging youth to improve the life chances of children in foster care. The Guide provides practical suggestions for planning a forum, conducting a forum, and harnessing the energy generated at the Forum into real action.

If you are interested in sponsoring a *From Place to Place* Forum in your community and would like your audience to see the video excerpt from the film, please contact Matt Anderson at [Matt@porchproductions.net](mailto:Matt@porchproductions.net).

## how to engage youth in our forums?

Throughout this document, we refer to the importance of youth engagement as a driving force for the *From Place to Place* Forum. Authentic youth engagement is a central goal behind the decision to make the film and to use it as a catalyst for change. In our experience, youth are eager to tell their stories and providing them a forum to share their knowledge about foster care can be a transformative process for both youth and adults.

We make a distinction between authentic youth engagement and traditional youth engagement for many reasons. Traditional youth engagement asks youth to tell their stories with the sole goal of educating adults about the impact of the foster care system on their life. Too often, for instance, adults bring a young person to a meeting, ask them to testify before the legislature, or give them a seat on an advisory committee with little or no expectation of future involvement in reform efforts.

Authentic youth engagement, on the other hand, assumes that youth will play an on-going role in the reform process as individuals who have first hand experience with the system and are experts in how the system impacts their lives. Authentic youth engagement can lead to systems changes that are more likely to make a positive difference for foster youth. The engagement process also helps youth build valuable leadership skills and create a supportive peer community that is working toward positive changes in the foster care system.

An authentic youth engagement process does not place sole responsibility with youth or with adults to make things happen. Rather, it relies on adults to take three active roles together with the youth:

- + LISTEN TO WHAT YOUTH HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES
- + TRUST WHAT YOUTH SAY BECAUSE THEY ARE EXPERTS IN THEIR OWN LIVES
- + TAKE ACTION WITH YOUTH AS PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

To achieve authentic youth engagement, *From Place to Place* community forums should be planned with or by youth and delivered with youth at the center of the event. By engaging youth as full partners, *From Place to Place* Community Forums can model how authentic youth engagement can be a catalyst for true systems change.



"I feel like I was heard. It feels good to know that i did something to help someone else." – **Raif** (after testifying to the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth)

## from capitol hill to communities

The idea for *From Place to Place* Community Forums was first born in an unlikely place: the United States Senate. In collaboration with the newly established Senate Caucus on Foster Youth, chaired by Senators Grassley (R-IA) and Landrieu (D-LA), Porch Productions hosted a forum for a Washington, DC based audience to view the short film and interview two of the film's stars: Raif and Mandy. Two additional foster youth from the Georgia Chapter of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative also participated in the forum.

### The Event was Special for Three Main Reasons

**FIRST** → **The film's powerful visual imagery provided an important backdrop to the conversation.** By showing the short video first, the audience was able to experience the emotional impact of the film and be exposed to the major themes of youth experience in foster care. Hearing these stories through film helped open the audience's hearts and minds to a dialogue with youth about their own personal experiences. It also helped to stimulate a more urgent discussion about what can be done to promote change.

**SECOND** → **The youth were clearly the stars of the event and their responses to questions were remarkably insightful and honest.** To the credit of the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth, as well as the facilitator, Gary Stangler from Jim Casey Youth Opportunities, adults did not try to take over the event with their own agenda. Rather, they created a safe and respectful environment so that youth could tell their stories with authority and adults could reflect on what these stories mean for national reform. Even Senator Landrieu sat in the back of the room and listened intently before going to the podium to speak.

"In our country it is just a crime and a shame the money we spend and the lives we wreck and the memories they have to keep for the rest of their lives that will never go away because of what we are not doing for them. Let's do better." – **Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA)**

**THIRD** → **The event DID stimulate a call to action.** Soon after the forum, the Senate Caucus for Youth announced a series of working sessions to begin crafting proposals to address some of the most complex issues that were raised by the youth at the forum, including the impact of psychotropic drugs, institutional placements, teen pregnancy, and aging out of foster care with no permanent family. Youth were invited to each of the forums as equal participants with adults and as experts in their own right. The working sessions resulted in a series of proposals that became a Call to Action for child welfare reform for the Senate Caucus. Senators Landrieu and Grassley released the Call to Action on the Dr. Phil show on the two-year anniversary of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

"One of the main goals of the Caucus is to break down the various silos that have prevented stakeholders from addressing all of the overlapping issues that affect children and youth in care. Hearing directly from the youth has helped us look at this issue holistically as it affects the child, not just as a funding stream or a program." – **Becky Shipp, Senate Finance Committee Health Policy Advisor**

Since this event, *From Place to Place: The Short Film* has been used in a variety of settings, including public agencies, non-profit organizations, high schools, universities, statewide children's summits and youth trainings.

### Examples of how groups have used the film to stimulate a community wide dialogue

+ **Washington State Division of Child and Family Services** screened the film during a regional wide training session focused on youth aging out of foster care. The goal was to bring together community members, school district personnel, social workers and other professionals to discuss how they can be pro-active rather than re-active. According to Tommy Williams, one of the participants said, "wow, I didn't know it was that bad. What can my organization do to be a part of the change?"

+ **Manger Consulting** used the film with faith-based organizations to prepare individuals who will work as camp counselors, staff and mentors in church-sponsored programs. According to Michael Hoggat, the movie has been inspirational and has raised awareness about the experience of foster youth. It has generated positive feedback from hundreds of individuals who have attended the trainings.

+ **Kinship Center** first began using the short film in trainings to help prospective adoptive parents understand what it's like for the child/youth living in the impermanence of foster care. After a positive response to the film, the Kinship Center decided to invite community members to see the film and hear directly from local foster car alumni. According to Allison Davis Maxon at the Kinship Center, "the impact of the screening is still reverberating as so many people were deeply touched by the film and the alumni panel. One community member is now volunteering for our organization because she said 'I can no longer just stick my head in the sand knowing that these kids are here in my community'.

+ **Big Sky High School** screened the film as a presentation during the school's Diversity Week. The film helped facilitate a discussion among our students about the foster care system. According to Scott Matthews, "It was a great starting point for our students to understand and show empathy to the challenges experienced by their classmates in foster care."

“The youth in foster care need a voice and an advocate and I believe it has finally come through this documentary. As a result of showing the Short Film, Montana has adopted the Family Finding Model and will be better equipped to ensure that all kids have a forever family. This is a “must see” for anyone concerned about the many youth in the foster care system.” – **Montana Representative Trudi Schmidt**

## planning a from place to place forum

There is no single way to conduct a *From Place to Place* Forum. Rather, each forum can be planned and conducted to meet the unique needs of each community. Regardless of where a community is in its evolution toward engaging youth as partners for change, there are 9 basic steps to planning a successful forum. They include:

- Step 1 Decide Sponsorship of the Forum
- Step 2 Choose a Facilitator
- Step 3 Develop Objectives
- Step 4 Pick a Venue
- Step 5 Determine Costs for the Event
- Step 6 Invite a Diverse Audience to the Forum
- Step 7 Help Youth Prepare Their Stories
- Step 8 Organize Materials for the Day
- Step 9 Make it Fun!

### Step 1. Decide Sponsorship of the Forum

*From Place to Place* forums can be sponsored by any individual, organization or group of organizations committed to authentic youth engagement. Sponsors first and foremost must understand the value of listening to youth voice and experience, respect what youth have to say, and be willing to take action in partnership with youth to facilitate change. Sponsors should have strong connections to youth in foster care and those who have aged out of foster care so that they understand the issues facing foster youth and can involve those youth who are eager to tell their stories. Sponsors should also be willing to provide financial support for the forum, or to find the resources needed to conduct the forum (see Step 5).

#### Sponsorship by already established youth organizations

Ideally, the forum can be sponsored by a well-established youth organization that has experience in planning and conducting meetings and community events. Well-established youth organizations are ones that are run by youth or have significant youth leadership well embedded in the organization. These organizations typically already have an advocacy and/or systems reform agenda and can use the forum to share their ideas.

#### Sponsorship to support emerging youth organizations

Other emerging youth groups might not be far enough along in their evolution to plan and facilitate a forum on their own. These groups might require external sponsorship to make the most of the film's power as a catalyst for change and begin to bring visibility to their developing agenda. External partners can help build youth capacity to plan and organize the Forums and delegate responsibilities for making it happen.

## Sponsorship to jump-start the youth engagement process

In communities just beginning the process of youth engagement, individuals and organizations can involve foster youth and former foster youth in planning and facilitating a community forum. In those communities where youth have not had an opportunity to share their experiences, the forum can be the first step toward the development of youth as leaders for change.

### EXAMPLES OF THOSE WHO CAN SPONSOR *FROM PLACE TO PLACE* FORUM INCLUDE:

- + Youth Groups, including youth advisory boards, advocacy groups or youth empowerment organizations
- + Foundations that are committed to building the capacity of youth to impact systems change
- + Legislative Bodies, including legislative committees, subcommittees, select committees or caucuses that focus on programs and policies for youth in foster care
- + Community based organizations that sponsor youth groups, serve foster youth or former foster youth, or are generally committed to youth empowerment, including organizations that are working to build awareness about racial disparities in the community.
- + Legal organizations that represent the interests of foster youth, including Court Appointed Special Advocates, judicial organizations, public interest attorneys groups, etc.
- + Universities, including schools of social work, social justice, community development and public policy to expose students and the university community to the importance of involving youth in community and systems change processes

## Step 2. Choose a Facilitator

Sponsoring organizations should pay careful attention to who is chosen as the facilitator for the *From Place to Place* Forum. In many cases, young adults who have experienced foster care first hand and have already led change efforts can be effective facilitators. If this is not available to a community, the highest priority is to ensure that the adult facilitator is committed to allowing youth voice to be heard and to be the central focus of the Forum. Facilitators should not have their own “agenda” for the meeting. Rather, the agenda is to allow the audience to develop an appreciation for what the stories and experiences of youth can add to the dialogue about systems change.

The right facilitator is someone who:

- + Respects and values the importance of youth voice in the process
- + Has authority, credibility, and respect in the community
- + Is committed to allowing the voices of foster youth to be the most prominent voice at the Forum
- + Has the commitment and skill to keep the Forum focused on the authentic voices and experiences of youth
- + Is committed to engaging a racially and ethnically diverse group of youth that is representative of the foster care population

- + Understands the need to thoroughly prepare youth for the experience
- + Protects the privacy, safety, and dignity of youth participants

Examples of facilitators who might be ideal candidates, assuming they meet the criteria above, include:

- + Former foster youth active in youth advocacy efforts
- + Leaders or staff of organizations, agencies, or foundations that work with foster youth
- + Foster or adoptive parents
- + Clergy
- + Judges
- + Legislator or legislative staff

## Step 3. Develop Goals

This facilitator’s guide has outlined three goals for the *From Place to Place* community forum, including:

- + TO BUILD AWARENESS ABOUT THE PLIGHT OF YOUTH IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM AND THOSE WHO LEAVE THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM WITHOUT A PERMANENT FAMILY
- + TO GIVE YOUTH A FORUM TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AND A CHANCE TO BE A PART OF THE SOLUTION
- + TO CREATE A SENSE OF URGENCY AND ACTION WITH A DIVERSE GROUP OF STAKEHOLDERS TO PLAY A MEANINGFUL ROLE IN ACHIEVING PERMANENCY FOR YOUTH

Communities might choose to use these same goals, or to adapt these goals to their own situations. For instance, well established youth organizations may have a proposal for policy or legislative change that they want the audience to hear and can develop a goal around raising awareness and getting support for their ideas. Other forums may be focused on engaging a specific audience around the Forum, such as policy makers, and may change the language of the third goal to be more specific about what they mean by “a diverse group of stakeholders”.

The importance of Step 3 is for youth, sponsors, facilitators and other partners to have a conversation about their goals for the forum so that everyone is on the same page about what they are trying to accomplish. Including this step as a deliberate dialogue between those involved in planning the forum can help to ensure that youth and adults are on the same page about how they will use the forum. This step is also critical to model how authentic youth engagement should hear the perspectives of youth throughout the engagement process.

## Step 4. Pick a Venue

There is no one "right" place to hold a *From Place to Place* Community Forum. As long as there is a place to project *From Place to Place: The Short Film* on a screen, any number of venues might work. The process of finding a space can also help force new connections within the community. Some possibilities include:

- + Local theatres that are available to the public for community events
- + Universities, community colleges or high schools with auditoriums
- + Large conference rooms in office buildings
- + Religious centers
- + Recreational centers, such as YMCA, YWCA or Boys and Girls Clubs
- + Public community spaces, including libraries, state houses, or city halls

Community spaces fill up quickly, so it is important to begin contacting possible forum locations very early in the planning process. Many locations require a payment to use the community space, so it is also important early on to understand possible costs associated with the forum and begin developing a budget. With enough lead-time, it might also be possible to find locations that do not charge for community events or would donate the space if they understand the cause.

This step can be a time consuming process that can be delegated to one or two people with strong contacts in the community who can negotiate the details of using the space.

## Step 5. Determine Cost of the Event

Costs associated with conducting the forum are minimal, but it is critical to identify these costs up front so that sponsors can seek the funds early on and avoid having to disappoint youth and community members if the resources aren't available. Costs will vary, and many can be covered through donations, but possible costs that should be considered include:

- + Rent for space – can be donated but some optimal community spaces charge for the space
- + Cost of Audio-Visual equipment (screen, projector, DVD player, etc.) – some spaces have the equipment for rent or it comes with the space, or can offer a large wall adequate for projection to reduce costs
- + Food and/or drinks for the forum if desired – costs can be reduced by asking local restaurants or markets to donate food
- + Custodial assistance – some venues require custodial or other staff to be on site if space is used in the evening
- + Design of the forum flyer and invitation, if sponsoring organizations do not have internal capacity for this, which can be sent by e-mail
- + Printing of packet information, if sponsoring organization can not print
- + Supplies/materials, including name tags, sign in sheets, packet folders, labels for packets.

Again, most costs associated with the Forum are minimal and can typically be donated, but knowing what to ask for takes careful planning. Forum planners may also decide that some costs, such as paying for a wonderful community space that will attract lots of participants, are worth paying for.

### SAMPLE BUDGET FOR: *FROM PLACE TO PLACE* COMMUNITY FORUM

SPACE (4 HOURS FLAT RATE)	\$400
RENTAL EQUIPMENT (SCREEN, PROJECTOR, DVD PLAYER SPEAKERS)	\$500
CUSTODIAL STAFF (40 HOURS FLAT RATE)	\$250
DESIGN SERVICES (DONATED BY SPONSOR)	-0-
E-VITE AND FLYER (BY E-MAIL)	-0-
FOOD/DRINK (DONATED BY BUSINESSES/BOARD MEMBERS)	-0-
SUPPLIES (NAME TAGS, ETC. DONATED BY SPONSOR)	-0-
PRINTING (DONATED BY SPONSOR)	-0-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,050</b>

\*This budget based upon actual experience conducting a *From Place to Place* forum in Washington, DC

## Step 6. Invite a Diverse Audience to the Forum

Each forum will have a unique flavor and a distinct set of priorities depending upon where the community is in building and prioritizing authentic youth voice. Driven by the goals set in Step 3, individual youth, sponsors and facilitators should decide who they want to attend the forum and what they want the audience to take away from their involvement. As always, organizers should consider those who work with or make decisions about the future of youth every day, including front line workers, mid and upper level management of social services agencies, non-profit and provider agencies that serve youth, educational leaders, teachers, professors, judges, attorneys, legislators, executive branch officials, and local media.

***From Place to Place* community forums can be used as an opportunity to draw untraditional allies to the cause of foster care reform.**

While the temptation might be to invite all the "usual suspects", consider invitations to individuals and organizations that might not have been exposed to foster care issues in the past. This might include friends who are not involved in foster care issues, the faith community, general youth groups (i.e. Boys and Girls Clubs,

YMCA's and YWCA's, and sports clubs), seniors groups, the arts community, foundations, corporations, local businesses, and many more.

### **Consider Testing the Waters on a Small Audience**

If your youth group is just getting started, and does not yet have an identified group of supporters, it can help to test out the film and dialogue on a small group of like minded people as a starting point. A small and intimate forum can give the group experience sharing their experiences and their ideas while laying the groundwork for a larger and more ambitious community forum.

### **Plunge Right In to a Large Community Forum**

There should be no limit to the number of people who are invited or the breadth of stakeholders who might attend a full blown *From Place to Place* Community Forum. Depending upon how many people the space allows, organizers can invite anyone and everyone who might be interested in the film and could benefit from listening to the voices of youth.

### **Provide a Platform for Leaders**

While youth voices should be the central attraction, sometimes asking one or two individuals in a position of power to speak (preferably after the youth have spoken) can send a powerful message about a leader's commitment to change. For instance, having a business leader talk about investing in or mentoring youth or a child welfare commissioner discuss their priorities for foster youth can be a valuable addition to youth voices. The important thing is to ensure that adult voices do not drown out the voices of youth and that they inspire the rest of the audience to follow the mantra: listen to youth, trust what they have to say, and take action in partnership with youth. It is important to educate leaders in advance about the purpose of the event so they understand that an underlying goal of the event is to model authentic youth engagement.

### **Prepare a Flyer and Invitation**

Porch Productions has provided sample flyers and invitations that can be used as a template for the forums (see Attachment \_\_\_\_). There are many ways to customize this invitation for each community, and sponsors and youth can decide how to make it relevant to their own needs. Communities may want to put photos of their youth on the flyer, or to include their own customized goals on the flyer and invitation. If there are other organizations that are partners in the forum, their names can be included as co-sponsors to model the community collaboration needed to promote foster care reform. Flyers can be sent through social media (i.e. Facebook, Twitter) and e-mail, as well as hard copy, to generate publicity with a diverse audience.

## **Step 7. Prepare Youth to Tell Their Stories**

*From Place to Place* Forums provide an excellent opportunity to give youth experience at telling their stories, having their voices heard, and being a part of a movement to make changes in the foster care system. Youth want to be heard, and to take part in efforts to ensure the next generation of youth is better connected to family and community. Becoming empowered to tell their stories helps youth become better advocates for themselves, as well as more effective advocates for systems reform.

The power of youth voices is undeniable. Equally awesome, however, is the responsibility that adults bear as they empower youth and prepare them for the experience of telling their stories. At every step in the process,

adults must protect youth from the vulnerability they face in sharing their stories and help them understand what aspects of their experience are okay to share with a broader audience. It is critical that adults watch for any signs that youth are being exploited in the process or that they were unprepared for the types of questions that come up.

### **TIPS FOR PREPARING YOUTH:**

#### **Help them shape their story**

The process of telling their stories can be healing, but it can also force young people to re-live their trauma every time they tell it. Adults can help young people balance the importance of telling their un-edited story, while also protecting them from sharing those parts that make them too vulnerable. Encourage youth to share only those parts of their story that they are completely comfortable sharing and not the parts that are too painful or counterproductive to their healing process. Remind young people that their story become part of the public record and to consider whether it is information they want future employers or college admissions offices to know.

An excellent guide for helping young people learn how to tell their stories, prepared by Casey Family Programs and Foster Care Alumni of America, can be found at <http://www.casey.org/resources/publications/strategicSharing.htm>

#### **Prepare them for questions they are likely to be asked**

Facilitators and sponsors of forums should have a good sense of the kinds of questions of interest to participants in the forum. Questions, for instance, typically center around how they felt about their caseworkers, whether or not they had a voice in court, whether they had friends or connections with siblings, how they felt about foster parents or institutions they lived in, their educational experience, and their plans for the future.

#### **Help them articulate what aspects of their stories are "off limits"**

Some youth do not want to talk about their parents; others might not want to share details about a particular foster placement. Although many youth are prepared to talk about most aspects of their time in foster care if they know it is intended to inform future changes, it is important to know if there are some things that are just too painful to discuss. When answering questions, empower youth to give a simply reply – "I would rather not discuss that" – without feeling the need to make excuses.

#### **Generate some peer support and shared experience**

Prior to the forum, convene a group of youth to help support those youth who will make the public presentations at the Forum. Oftentimes, youth want to be able to say, "many of my peers have experienced a similar thing" so they don't feel their story is an isolated event or that they are to blame for their situations. Youth may also want to generate a set of questions they would like the forum attendees to ask.

#### **Generate ideas for change**

Ask youth to generate some ideas for change for youth presenters to share at the Forum. For emerging youth groups, these ideas might not be fully formed yet, but will give them some positive solutions to share. For



"It's pretty daunting that a little Montana girl is going to be able to have a national effect on the foster care system." - Mandy

### Walk them through the details of the event and ask for their input

Youth should be prepared for precisely what to expect and how the event will unfold.

Some suggestions for preparation include:

- + Brief them on who will be in the audience and what their roles are; ask if they know others who should be invited.
- + If journalists have been invited, prepare them for the possibility that someone will want to do a story on their experience; ask their permission to grant interviews with anyone from the media.
- + Show them the event space ahead of time; ask them where they prefer to sit and how they suggest the room be set up.
- + Show them the video prior to the event to elicit their reactions and their ideas, including what resonated or didn't resonate about the stories in the film. Have them talk about the themes they see as prevalent in the video.
- + Give them some sample questions and ask them to answer them as if it were a live event; help them shape their answers – not for content, but to help them build confidence in their ability to answer the questions using their own experience
- + Listen closely to questions and concerns and respond wherever possible; always give them an "out" if it becomes too overwhelming or scary to them, but acknowledge that it is completely natural to be nervous.
- + Most importantly, reinforce that they are the experts on their own experience and no one can take that away from them.
- + Manage Expectations – Youth will be excited about the prospect of influencing the hearts and minds of adults who have the power to initiate change. Adults, in turn, will be excited about the energy and ideas that are generated at the forum. It's important that adults help youth understand that change is a process, and that the forum is just one step in that process. Adult sponsors and facilitators of the forum can manage expectations by reinforcing the long term nature of systems reform and encouraging them to pursue their personal, educational and career prospects while also becoming a part of the foster care reform movement.

## Step 8. Organize Materials for the Day

Some simple preparation can help make the forum go more smoothly and prevent last minute confusion and worry:

- Step 1 Set up a table outside the room** – be sure that no one can get into the room without first passing the table so they can sign in and take informational packets.
- Step 2 Sign In Sheet** – prepare a sign in sheet so you have a list of people who attended for future correspondence
- Step 3 Informational packets** – Information packets can give readers a sense of what is going on in their own communities and written materials that they can refer to later. Materials from local and state agencies, foundations and advocacy groups can be found on websites with the help of sponsoring organizations.

The following are suggested materials for informational packets:

- + Data sheet, which includes the number of children in foster care in the city, county or state and their age and race, length of stay for children in foster care, the number of foster youth who age out of care with no permanent home, and national statistics on the number of children who age out of care with no permanent homes and outcomes from the research
- + Information about racial disproportionality in the foster care system if it is an issue in your community
- + Information about the sponsoring organization
- + Biographical information about the youth who speak at the forum. This may include stories about their experience in care or their own writing, such as poems, essays, etc.
- + Local media stories about foster care
- + A list of recommendations for systems changes that are generated by youth
- + One pagers on what individuals or organizations attending the forum can do to create change (see Top 10 Things Ordinary Citizens Can Do to Make Life Better for Foster Youth)

- Step 4 Order "swag"** – hand out buttons, bumper stickers, pens, reusable grocery bags, note paper or other memorabilia to give the audience the sense that they are part of a larger movement. Youth can participate in decisions about what the message should be. Catchy phrases like "have you listened to a young person today?" or items with the name of a youth empowerment group will remind people of what they experienced at the forum long after it has occurred. Sponsors can often get discounts if they inform vendors what the forum is all about.

## Step 9. Make it Fun!

There is no question that the issues are serious and the expectations for success are high, but the process of planning a *From Place to Place* Forum can also be fun. The rewards of planning a forum can be seen in the

collaboration, partnership, and bonding that takes place, which is even more likely to happen if there are opportunities to have fun.

While adults may measure success by how many people show up at the forum and whether ideas generated at the forum take hold, they must also remember that they are working with young adults who deserve to relax and let loose every once in a while.

## WAYS TO MAKE IT FUN

- + Have youth friendly food at planning meetings
- + Allow youth to play music during planning sessions
- + Encourage fun brainstorming sessions about ideas for systems change, design of the flyers and invitations, what kind of swag to order and who to invite
- + Take road trips together to look at choices for event space
- + Allow youth to take photos that can be used for flyers or to put up around the room during the event
- + Ask youth for THEIR ideas about how to MAKE IT FUN!

## conducting from place to place forums

Just as there is no one-way to plan a *From Place to Place* forum, neither is there one way to conduct it. The following steps for holding a forum draw from experience the producers have had with similar forums in the past. Each community can take these ideas and build on them to make forums community relevant and responsive to their own community needs.

- Step 1 Introduce the Film
- Step 2 Show Film
- Step 3 Structure a Dialogue

### STEP 1 Introduce the Film

*From Place to Place* is best introduced by telling the inspiration behind the film. The history of the film is described in further detail in the Producer's Note at the beginning of this guide.

Important things to emphasize include:

- + The film was inspired by a young person in a transitional living program who wanted his story to be told.
- + The producer and director of the film, Matt Anderson and Paige Williams, believe in the power of the stories of young people to create change and feel that film can be a powerful medium to stimulate ideas and generate commitment.
- + Porch Productions recognizes that youth in other communities may look different and have different racial and ethnic profiles than the Montana youth in this film, but the challenges for all of our nation's youth in foster care are shared challenges.
- + Porch Productions wants the film to be used to help more youth in foster care tell their story, with the ultimate goal of inspiring widespread community action to improve youth outcomes.
- + Above all else, the hope is that the film can generate the kinds of changes that lead to more youth finding permanent families and permanent community connections that last into adulthood.

### A WORD ABOUT RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY

While *From Place to Place* was filmed in Montana, and the youth who are the central characters in the film are White, Porch Productions recognizes that in this country, youth of color – including African American, Native American, and in some communities Latino youth – are placed in foster care at a rate that far exceeds their total share of the population. *From Place*

to Place Community Forums provide an opportunity to highlight the fact that institutional racism is alive and well in the child welfare system and to shine a light on it as a serious problem.

Throughout this guide, we recommend ways to draw attention to the facts about racial disparities and the experiences of youth of color in foster care.

Youth driven forums will provide an opportunity to put a face on this experience and ensure that all youth have an opportunity to voice their concerns, opinions, hopes and fears about how children of color are impacted by child welfare intervention. For more information on racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, see <http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/cultural/disporp/>

## STEP 2 Show the Film

Ask the audience to watch the film with an eye toward the themes that emerge from the stories of the young people. Warn the audience that the film brings out the some of the worst aspects of youth experience in foster care, but also points to some of the positives. Ask them to consider both the negatives AND the positive themes they hear so they don't leave the forum feeling that there is nothing that can be done to make a difference.

## STEP 3 Structure a Dialogue

The best way to model a youth engagement process is to follow the film with the stories of youth from the community/state in which the forum is held.

### SOME OPTIONS FOR STRUCTURING THIS PART OF THE FORUM

#### Ask the audience to themes and questions

Remind them that there will be an opportunity to ask questions of the youth and make observations about the film and youth stories later in the Forum

#### Ask youth to tell their stories

Youth should be prepared ahead of time for 5-minute versions of their stories, with only the details that they feel comfortable sharing. They might consider structuring the story chronologically, with details about how they came into care, the number of placements they have had, which placements worked for them and why, which placements did not work for them and why, and any major themes they want to impart about their time in foster care. It is critically important to allow this time for the uninterrupted and unscripted version of the youth stories so it feels genuine and authentic to the audience.

#### Take questions from the audience

Allow those participating in the forum to ask the youth questions. There is no need to script the questions, as long as the youth understand that they do not have to answer anything they are not comfortable discussing and the audience understands ahead of time that youth reserve the right not to answer certain questions.

#### If the audience is shy about asking questions, prompts can include

Did you have friends while you were in foster care? How important were your friends to you?

Did you stay in the same school? What was your educational experience like?

Were you able to be placed with or see your parents very often? How about your siblings?

What types of placements did you live in? Which were the best and why? Which were the worst and why?

Was medication prescribed for you and if so, do you believe it was helpful?

What was your relationship with your caseworker? Your attorney? Your judge?

Ask the audience to share themes they have heard – Remember, it is important to elicit both negative and positive themes.

#### \\ Negative Themes

Isolation  
Separation from family, friends and community  
Trauma  
Over medication  
Negative peer influences  
Lack of hope for the future  
Racial bias  
Absence of voice in the process  
Bureaucracy

#### \\ Positive Themes

Resiliency  
Strength  
Independence  
Adaptation  
Positive peer support  
Family connections  
Ideas for how to change the system  
Culturally responsive services  
Trauma focused services

#### Discuss solutions

Ask the youth first, and then the audience – to share any solutions have for changing the system to better support foster youth. Document these ideas so they are available for consideration later. Remind the audience that the ideas they generate can be used as the foundation for change for foster care reform.

## creating a call to action

The third goal of the Forum – to create a sense of urgency and action with a diverse group of stakeholders to play a meaningful role in a better future for foster youth – is the most spontaneous yet exciting part of the forum and can set the stage for commitments that will lay the foundation for future change. To effectively create a call to action, it is important to hear from youth and audience participants, and to find ways to continue the momentum in the days and months following the forum. Steps to create a Call to Action include:

- Step 1 Elicit ideas from youth about how to get involved
- Step 2 Ask for audience commitments
- Step 3 Keep Up The Momentum

### STEP 1 Elicit ideas from youth about how to get involved

Youth can jump start this conversation by sharing their ideas for how audience members can be a part of the solution. These ideas might include ideas as varied as proposals for policymakers to consider, things they would like caseworkers and judges to keep in mind, or ways that individual community members can become involved. Youth might have ready-made proposals for reforms at their fingertips, or they might want the ideas to be stimulated by the dialogue that comes before this part of the forum.

### STEP 2 Ask for audience commitments

A facilitated audience dialogue can provide space for participants to process what they have seen and heard during the forum and to think about the skills, knowledge and insights they can bring to the change process. Allowing time for audience members to verbalize their commitment to future action is the first step toward holding everyone accountable for needed reforms. Some questions for the audience that can support this dialogue include:

- + What did you learn today that you didn't know before today?
- + What can you commit to today as a result of being at this forum?
- + What would you like others to commit to as a result of this forum?

In addition to facilitated dialogue, forum planners can prepare the following information and activities to support the Call to Action. These include:

#### **"Top 10 Things Individuals and Organizations Can Do to Support Foster Youth"**

Provide the audience with a list of things they can do and contact information for who to call. Put the list in their packets and be sure they know it is in there before they leave (a sample document is in Attachment).



"How we care for young people in this country really defines the strength of us as a country; and it matters."

– Kevin Campbell

#### **Send Audience Members their Commitments in the Mail**

Provide everyone in the audience with an envelope and ask them to write their name and address on the envelope. Have them write their commitment on a piece of paper and put the paper in the envelope and seal it. Be sure everyone turns the envelope in before they walk out the door. Send the envelopes 1-2 weeks after the forum. This is particularly effective for those individuals who are reluctant to speak out in public.

#### **Document the Ideas Generated at the Forum**

As youth and audience members share their commitments, be sure that someone documents these and that they become part of the "record" for the forum. The notes can then be used as the basis for a newsletter article or e-mail blast that goes out to the community after the forum.

### STEP 3 Building on the Momentum

The forum has raised awareness, sparked interest, and generated commitment among the forum participants. The ideas that were shared can begin to take shape as different stakeholders leave the forum with the faces of youth from their community in their heads. Additionally, people who didn't know each other have now become connected as part of a larger movement around youth engagement and foster care reform.

The critical question is how to maintain the momentum so that the commitments people have made stick and translate into real action on behalf of foster youth. The following steps might help to produce the staying power needed for true reform:

#### **Write a Letter to the Editor**

Prepare an op-ed to submit to newspapers that shares the ideas from the forum and calls on readers to share the commitments that individuals and organizations have made.

#### **Write to governors, legislators, commissioners & other leaders about ideas that were Shared**

If high-level officials were not in attendance at the forum, write a letter (and include pictures!) about the forum to remind these leaders the need to support efforts to engage foster youth and the priority of finding them permanent families.

### Use Technology!

Create an on-line community through a listserve or blog so forum participants can continue communicating about ways they have responded to the Call to Action and progress that is being made on youth engagement and systems improvements.

### Engage the Media

Look for media coverage on the challenges facing youth who age out of care, as well as success stories at helping foster youth find permanent families.

### Generate Grassroots Advocacy

Ask for letters of endorsement for legislative initiatives, budget proposals, and funding requests; use the power of the community to fight off possible threats to programs or funding streams.

### Support Advocacy led by Foster Youth in your Community

In many places around the country, emerging youth advocacy groups could use a stronger base of allies and greater visibility for their work. In other areas, no such group exists, and the Community Forum can be the catalyst for launching such a group. Contact national advocacy organizations such as the National Foster Youth Action Network (<http://www.fosteryouthaction.org>) to learn more about how you can support the voices of foster youth where you live.

### Spread the Idea of Community Forums

Hold additional *From Place to Place* Community Forums for different target audiences, including social services agencies, schools, universities, courts, and the legislature.

The *From Place to Place* Community Forum is an important catalyst for change, but by itself is just one step in the process toward the individual, organizational and systems changes needed to improve outcomes for America's foster youth. We are eager to hear about your community forum: how it was organized, who attended, and most importantly, the resulting call to action. Please contact Matt Anderson at [Matt@porchproductions.net](mailto:Matt@porchproductions.net) so we can share your experience with others.

One day won't fix the system forever, but can lay the foundation for the next stage of the process to take place. If the forum has helped to generate a commitment to values – that children should not grow up in foster care and that every child deserves a family – then it has been a success.

## A CALL TO ACTION: TOP 10 THINGS INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO TO MAKE LIFE BETTER FOR FOSTER YOUTH

**1** Be a voice for young people in court by becoming a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) (see <http://www.casa.org>) or raise awareness in your community about the importance of supporting an existing or creating a new foster youth led advocacy group (see <http://www.fosteryouthaction.org>)

**2** Mentor any young person at risk, including a young person in foster care – [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org)

**3** Become a foster or adoptive parent – [www.nfpainc.org](http://www.nfpainc.org) or [www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org)

**4** Provide respite care to birth, foster and adoptive parents (contact your local department of social services)

**5** Support a young person who has aged out of foster care without a permanent family by mentoring, providing transportation, supporting their education or providing for their materials needs – [www.orphan.org](http://www.orphan.org)

**6** Offer assistance (financial or in-kind) to a community-based organization serving children, youth and families Write letters to your elected officials in support of youth advocacy proposals

**7** Write letters to your elected officials in support of youth advocacy proposals

**8** Meet with your Congressional representatives, state legislators or city/county officials and share what you have learned at the community forum

**9** Provide financial resources to support emerging or already established youth advocacy organizations.

**10** Share copies of *From Place to Place: The Film* with your family, friends and colleagues to raise awareness about the needs of foster youth ([www.fromplacetoplacemovie.com](http://www.fromplacetoplacemovie.com))

## What is Permanency?

\* This fact sheet has been adapted from material published by the National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness – see [http://www.senecacenter.org/perm\\_booklets](http://www.senecacenter.org/perm_booklets)

Permanency is both a process and a result that includes involvement of the youth as a participant or leader in finding a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides:

- 1 A safe, stable and secure parenting relationship
- 2 Love
- 3 Unconditional commitment
- 4 Lifelong support in the context of reunification, a legal adoption, or guardianship, where possible, and in which the youth has the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons including brothers and sisters.

## Permanency Philosophy and Values

Child welfare's mission is to keep children safe AND to insure they are part of a permanent family. Finding permanency for each youth is a process and requires ongoing, in-depth practice. Belief in

permanency requires the following values:

- + Every youth deserves, and can have, a permanent family.
- + With support, most youth can have permanent parents and lifelong family relationships rather than live in foster care or institutions.
- + Permanency is achieved through reunification, guardianship, adoption, or another form of permanent commitment.
- + Long-term placement in foster care is not a permanent plan.
- + Youth have the right to know about family members; family members have the right to know about their youth.
- + Siblings are critical to a youth's sense of permanency. Social worker places siblings together, arranges visits, and explores older siblings as permanent connections.
- + Finding permanency is youth-centered: youth are involved and updated at every step.
- + Relationships with adults prior to foster care are maintained and developed.
- + Youth remain connected with biological family, regardless of whether they live with them.
- + Even if a youth's family has grave problems, the youth decides whether to have contact and agencies support the youth through the process.

## Additional Resources

- 1 Event Flyer
- 2 Community Forum

...changing the system that raised them...

# From PLACE TO PLACE community forum

listen to youth • trust youth • take action with youth

(Sponsor) Presents

## From Place to Place Community Forum

**Where:** Venue

**When:** Date and Time

**Who:** Youth, Professionals and Community Members

Our Community Forum is part of a national conversation about improving America's foster care system. Each *Forum* brings together current and former foster youth, professionals and community members to screen *From Place to Place The Short Film* and engage in proactive conversation.

**The Goals of the *Forum* are:**

1. To build awareness!
2. To give youth and alumni a voice!
3. To create a sense of urgency and action!

**For more information contact:** Sponsor Name at 555-555-5555 or [soandso@something.com](mailto:soandso@something.com). To organize your own *Community Forum*, contact Matt Anderson at 406-544-0201 or [matt@porchproductions.net](mailto:matt@porchproductions.net) or [www.fromplacetoplace.com](http://www.fromplacetoplace.com)

thank you to our sponsors!



...changing the system that raised them...

# From PLACE TO PLACE community forum

listen to youth • trust youth • take action with youth

After aging out of America's foster care system, *From Place to Place* follows plucky underdogs Mandy and Raif on an unlikely journey as they set out to change the system that raised them. The film gives a gritty glimpse into life post-foster care while documenting two courageous young souls who decide to fix the system for the next generation. Mandy and Raif make it all the way to Capitol Hill to meet members of Congress and testify to the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth. The power of their stories sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in the Caucus' Call to Action for comprehensive child welfare reform.

**From Place to Place Community Forums** are part of a national conversation about America's foster care system. Each Forum features the screening of the short or feature film along with a panel presentation by local foster youth and alumni. These events not only highlight the voice of young people, but should include them in all aspects of planning and follow up. The goal is to highlight their stories and ideas for change, while bringing together professionals, policy makers and community members for a proactive conversation. This is no longer the work of social workers alone, it is time that individuals, families, communities and agencies come together to talk about how we are going to care for the next generation of kids in foster care.

**The objectives of each Forum are:**

1. To build **AWARENESS** about the state of America's foster care system
2. To create a sense of **URGENCY** to help America's children in foster care
3. To move people to **ACTION** to reform America's foster care system

**"The impact of the film and youth panel is still reverberating within our agency."**

**Allison, Kinship Center**

To organize a From Place to Place Community Forum in your community please **contact** the film's Producer Matt Anderson, MSW. Matt is available to speak at Community Forums and facilitate the panel. 406.544.0201 or [matt@porchproductions.net](mailto:matt@porchproductions.net) [www.fromplacetoplacemovie.com](http://www.fromplacetoplacemovie.com)