

WV FAM

By Alicia McIntire, Youth Services Policy Specialist (HHRSS) - Bureau for Children and Families, WV Department of Health & Human Resources

A group is being formed of former and current youth who were in foster care. The group has named itself [WV Foster Advocacy Movement](#). In partnership with Legal Aid of West Virginia, Family Advocacy Support and Training, and [WV Youth Move](#) Youth a platform which is similar to Facebook has been launched to connect youth all across West Virginia. The service is secure so that youth can feel safe sharing their experiences.

Youth can participate in surveys and provide their unique youth voice on issues and policies. Events and opportunities to speak at conferences are being posted so that youth can influence programs and make positive changes to the foster care systems.

While WVFAM is a new organization, youth voices have been advocating for change in foster care in West Virginia for many years. One example of how youth have made a positive change is reflected in the passage of Senate Bill 484 during the 2012 Legislative Session. A survey of youth during the annual [Youth Transitioning Conference](#) in 2007 provided valuable feedback on the Multidisciplinary Team process (MDT). The MDT was designed to bring youth, their family/caregivers and professionals involved with the case together to determine the best services, supports and placement options for the youth. Overwhelmingly youth told policy makers they were not involved, or were even counseled by attorneys not to speak up during these important meetings.

Especially in situations where youth had addiction or behavior problems, youth were often told that their input might negatively impact their court cases. The result had been that youth who may want and need treatment were not provided those options.

Through these youth voices being heard at policy meetings and legislative hearings, the MDT process was reformed to encourage youth participation. While most of us have heard, "Anything you say can, and will be used against you," from movies like Bad Boys, this legislation now excludes the youth's conversations in the MDT from being used in the court case.

The revised state code provides that "If a juvenile respondent admits the underlying allegations of the case initiated pursuant to article five, chapter forty-nine of this code in the multidisciplinary treatment planning process, his or her statements shall not be used in any juvenile or criminal proceedings against the juvenile, except for perjury or false swearing."

Real change to Foster Care is possible in West Virginia as evidenced by the example of the change to MDT processes. Please encourage youth to join [Youth Move WV](#). Once a youth joins Youth Move WV, they are asked to join through the group WV FAM. Please check out [YouthMoveWV.com](#) and the WV FAM group.