

VOICE

THE STORY

Phillip had made a decision to turn his life around. As a young man he had been involved in the child welfare system as well as the young offender system. He then decided at a very young age that he did not want to be a part of these systems for the rest of his life. He was released from the juvenile institution and was living in a safe place. His grades improved and he became involved in school activities. He saved all of his certificates of recognition and achievement and demanded they be included in his child welfare file. He understood at a very young age the detrimental impact of a case file that is full of negative aspects of a young person's life.

"Any time you are without freedom of choice you are incarcerated." (p. 28, Through the Eyes of the Judged)

Youth in care feel that their voices are not being heard. The notion of having a voice and being heard is crucial to the development and empowerment of young people. There are different ways for youth in care to have a voice. The most critical and important way is to be allowed to provide input in the formation of their plan of care. The plan of care dictates the actions that will be undertaken in the "best interests of the child". According to the Canadian Looking After Children project: "This plan maps out the school, the group home/foster home placement, who the social worker is, in essence, what happens to the life trajectory of

the young person. A major consideration in the design of the tool is the young person's level of comfort with the content. Youth in care have repeatedly reported the damaging effects of child welfare record-keeping practices, which tend to focus on negative events and perceived "behavioral problems". To help prevent this, youth in and from care must participate in the design of the record. When the record tool is actually being used, consensus must be reached by the conference participants about what can and cannot be entered into the record. This will allow the youth in care a significant voice in the discussion and resulting record-keeping. (Who Will Teach Me To Learn?)

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Listen to youth, the "consumer", and work with them in a "human approach" to planning and record keeping.
2. Encourage youth to share their opinions and provide input into their plans of care. Explain how and why decisions are made.
3. Help youth understand long-term implications of the "plan of care" as a life process and not merely a systemic process.