

## STIGMA

### THE STORY

*Marguerite was placed in her third foster home. This foster home had a mom, a dad, two daughters and two dogs. The foster father was an affectionate man and Marguerite was not used to a male figure, let alone one that liked to hug and be close. Marguerite was uncomfortable in this environment and wanted to leave. The foster father had wanted to hold her hand on the way to school. She did not, and again told her worker she wanted to leave. She was labeled as attachment disordered in her file because she did not want to hold her foster father's hand on the way to school.*

The stigma attached to being a youth in care is an overriding concern for youth in care. They have already faced the challenge of being forced to leave their home because their home lives are disruptive and unhealthy for a multitude of reasons. Unfortunately for youth in care, the next challenge they face is trying to fit back into a society that asks them; "What did you do?" They are continually forced to the periphery of society due to further victimization, marginalization and criminalization.

A recurrent comment made by youth in care is the negative portrayal of them in their case files. The files do not necessarily portray an accurate overall picture of them. These records read like rap sheets with full documentation of negative behaviors and attitudes without the balance of

their positive gains in school and other successes due to lack of time, problem-oriented processes, staff, risk assessment models of operation and being unaware of the negative impacts. The system as it stands records mostly negative behaviors and attitudes because its resources - time, finances, and people - are limited. However, the pictures presented in each case file are often skewed negatively as a result.

In addition, youth in care are further stigmatized by their inability, due to money issues or constraints of group home life, to participate in extracurricular activities, sleepovers and other activities many teens take for granted. This further marginalizes and separates youth in care from their peers.

### THE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Social service providers should encourage the inclusion of positive qualities and achievements of youth in care in their files.
2. Community outreach and education should take place. The community and others to be included in a youth's life should be encouraged to participate.
3. Youth should be encouraged to participate in support groups run by and for youth to decrease their senses of isolation and stigmatization.