Project Everlast Council

January Leadership Board Meeting
Suggestions for Improvement:

I. Case Management
   a. Make sure monthly check-ups from caseworkers, CASA's, lawyers and others involved in our case happen consistently.
   b. Have more communication about the Reform and case happenings done in plain terms that the youth can understand.

II. Independent Living
   a. Provide every youth aging out with a PALS worker, so that youth can learn how to prepare for college and have support as they transition into college.
   b. Expand the Former Ward program.
   c. Expand Food Stamps and Medicaid to allow youth to access these services until they are 20, particularly for those without other supports/resources.
   d. Provide more TLP programs for youth who will be or have aged out into independent living.
   e. Help youth find and get settled into their first home after aging out.
   f. Support, including access to vital records, to allow youth to take driver's education courses and obtain a driver's licenses and vehicle.

III. Supportive Relationships and Placements
   a. More stringent interviews, background checks and training of foster parents to ensure the best homes are found.
   b. People to help like our NFYC Youth Advisor. Some youth just wanted more people to talk to.
   c. Provide more support to families before, during and after removal. This could include maintaining extended family relationships or longer visits with family.
   d. Provide additional resources to foster parents to allow for youth to participate in extra activities at school or in the community. This includes items such as food when traveling for an event.

Summit for Youth Permanence
Recommendations from youth:

a. Build IL programming around permanent lifelong family relationships and teach IL skills through natural means (conversations/example).
b. All young people deserve to have permanence with healthy supportive adults that is built and nurtured while in foster care.
c. More natural visitation with extended biological family and siblings
d. A CASA volunteer who focuses on and advocates for them alone
e. Caseworkers have the time, support and resources to make thoughtful decisions, follow through on agreed actions and have quality communications with youth. Including supports for less worker turnover.
f. Young people deserve to have a sense of normalcy even while in the system. No background checks for car rides, over nights, hanging out with friends.
g. No young people should stay in emergency shelter or temporary placements for an extended amount of time.
h. All young people deserve to feel important, heard, and valued.

i. Supervised visits should be conducted in the most natural and respectful way possible. (Not embarrassing for family)
j.

Notes from January Meeting with DHHS:

Janteice shared her concerns about the Former Ward program. She had talked with other states about how to improved former ward and told about what she'd found. **The group decided to share the issue Todd about and created a sub-committee to look at the Former Ward program. Kisha, Janteice, Jessica, Amy and Ricardo volunteered to serve on the committee. Alana and Jason said they would help.**

I. Meeting with Todd Reckling and Chris Hanus from DHHS: The board shared youth concerns including:

a. What youth know about reform:

i. Amy asked Todd and Chris to explain the reform in their words. Todd gave a summary that focused on the effort putting youth and children in safe vs. unsafe homes, that all 50 states are working towards a federal goal and that goal is to find timely permanency (Guardianship/Adoption/Reunification) for all youth and children, so that youth can get back to a permanent, stable home. Chris talked about the service coordination between Contractors and DHHS. She discussed that the service coordination between the contractors and DHHS became confusing, so the Easter and Southeastern Service Areas have completely move case management to the Contactors. Kansas is the model Nebraska is attempting to duplicate. They are hoping to fill openings for Contractors in the Western, Northern and Central Service Areas by July 2012. Currently, KVC, a company from Kansas, is the only Contractor for the Southeast Service area. KVC and NFC, a collaboration of CSI, Omni, Heartland and Boys Town, are the contractors for the Eastern Service area. These agencies are the case managers; DHHS monitors the outcomes of the Contractors and maintain legal guardianship of state wards.

ii. Amy asked, "How the transfer of case management help?" Chris said that it allows for more flexibility because the Contractors can adapt to environments and social conditions more easily than state government. She also said that the state was not doing well with oversight, before and this allowed the state to create a system to monitor quality control. Todd felt that no matter who does it getting the best services is what is the most important. For example, Contractors can lower case loads by hiring more help than state government can. By lowering the number of youth currently in care through this process, the hope is to be able to focus on more prevention in the future.

iii. Kisha shared a personal story about the amount of case managers and placements she experienced and how that caused confusion and strife. She felt the system lost focus and was not consistent

iv. Amy explained how youth struggle with the lack of communication and confusion about who to talk with when they are in care. Chris told the youth that they have to have to ask themselves, "How do I get my needs met?" She told them to get their needs me by being proactive and appropriate; that it is ok to be assertive, but not aggressive. Todd said that the State makes a terrible parent and that they must get youth families by finding supports, being more community-based and less artificial. He also shared that for the first time ever the are able to over 12 months of after-care to keep youth from re-entering the system. Chris encouraged everyone to look on the DHHA website for details about the contracts for contractors and other information about Family Matters. She also mentioned that Foster Youth are eligible for after care until they are age 21 provided by the Contractors.

b. System Questions:

i. Janteice asked, "How are youth removed from their home?" Todd said that a case manager can not remove youth, that law enforcement is the primary removal agency and that the Court can also remove youth He also shard that DHHS looks for other options to help reduce removals. Chris shared that DHHS will be in charge of determining safety not the contractors. Removal happens in some cases due to the need for safety plans to be developed and background checks ran on kinship placements.

ii. Janteice asked about the standards for picking Foster Families. Chris said that the State Standards are available on the website. She also talked a great deal about stressing the importance of placing youth with another family member and attempting to create a way to find the most appropriate match between youth and foster parents. However, the process in still in development.

c. Concerns and Barriers

i. Oscar talked about placements. He started with school placements; saying that when he was moved his foster parent was in charge of the transcript to be transferred and he lost credit because of the delay in paperwork. He shared that it should be the responsibility of the case manager to ensure and support consistency in education. Chris shared that state law requires that removed youth remain in same school district, unless safety is threatened. Next, Oscar talked about home placements and stressed the importance

of making more compatible matchings between the youth and foster placement. Several youth shared their stories. Amy told of her sister who was placed in a home where no one but a young child spoke English and was there two weeks before being moved. Others told of being separated from siblings. Chris shared how Nebraska has been working to keep siblings together at foster placements

ii. Oscar brought up the stigma and difficulty many youth in care face in making peer connections because the state requires their friends' parents go through a background check before they can go to things like a sleep-over. The youth asked if this was always necessary? Chris thought it was probably a liability is an issue and admitted that this is a hard choice to make and understood the stigma created.

iii. The group then brought up how youth often felt removed from the process of their case. Jessica gave the example of being asked to leave half-way through team/family meetings without being told why. She said that the lack of communication causes anxiety and fear. Todd explained that team meeting need to be appropriately conducted and sometimes case mangers ask youth to leave out of respect for the conversations that they need to have with parents. The group understood, but requested that be told that or that a separate meeting is scheduled for those conversations. Chris suggested that the council revisit their old training videos for case managers and create new videos for case managers on how to deal with siblings, schools, communication, etc.

iv. The group brought up the issue of Former Ward next. Janteice and Cassey shared that most of their council did not know about any resources for college including Former Ward. Janteice then explained some of the struggles she's had with the program. Chris asked if the council would be willing to create a small committee to look at expansion of the Former Ward Program. Todd suggested expanding the group to include looking at more resources, education and how to spread the information around Independent Living Preparation. Jason asked about summaries of Former Ward and other DHHS resources and if they could be shared on the Project Everlast-Omaha Website. Chris directed him to Shirley Pickens-White and said it was ok to add the summaries.

d. Suggestions and Improvement

i. Abby started by talking about case management improvements by sharing her story of not being told much during her frequent recent moves and how that made her feel anxious and scared. She also told of how she had a family that wanted to take her and that she new well, but was not allowed to live with them because they were not licensed. Other youth shared similar stories. Chris explained that many of these situations may have qualified under "persons know to the youth", but that sometimes things get misunderstood. She wasn't sure why it worked out like it did. She encouraged the youth to reach out to her, if they were ever unsure about a policy.

ii. Independent Living was the next topic. Spirit shared how she's been supported and how that's been very helpful as she prepares to age out. The council suggested expanding skill development and training for youth. Todd then asked about what age youth thought independent living skill development should be started with youth in care. Some thought 14 years of age. Others felt it should be on-going from the second a youth enters care much like a parent would teach his or her child. They did agree that the age should be at minimum 16, but start at least at 14.

iii. Haley shared a poem (below) to talk about the importance of Supportive Relationships for youth in care.

1. "Foster Care wears on child like a full-time job, family and credit card bills wear on an adult. Each day, it takes a piece of us that will take months, maybe years, to replace. You may think that the rehabilitation of a foster child's soul only needs some super glue, a roll of duct tape, and a few band aides to cover the scars, then wow, its good as new. But the only true solution is not to cover wounds, but to let the hands and hearts of a supportive relationship heal them. A supportive relationship, especially after aging out, is when they carry us until we have recovered from a long journey through the system. They teach us, help us, give us the encouragement to keep moving forward and most importantly, forgive our mistakes without the price of handing us off to someone else. Every youth needs that one person or one family to rehabilitate a foster child's soul. Each supportive relationship means something different to each youth. If you only do one thing for each youth, I feel it should be to find that one supportive person for them. By doing this you can give a youth a whole new world, which is more than anyone could ask for."

e. Next Steps

i. **Work group on aging out resources via the sub-committee will be created**. This group would look at contracts, find cases that seemed out of place and share, work on an approach for consistency and

cooperate with DHHS and contractors to fix. Essentially, understand responsibilities of contractors and design programs in connect with resources to provide lasting change and skills.

ii. **Keep open communication between this group and DHHS**. Todd asked if youth would be available to attend meetings or presentations with him because of the power of youth's words. Cassy said that Todd could contact her at anytime and she'd help him connect with an appropriate youth.

iii. Alana asked about connections to local DHHS Services**. Todd encouraged partnerships between local councils and local DHHS offices.**