



District of Columbia

BILL *of* RIGHTS

for Children and Youth in Foster Care





This document explains your rights while you are in foster care in the District of Columbia.

The District has laws that protect your rights as a young person in foster care. One of these laws is that the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) must make sure you get a copy of your rights. If you lose this copy and want another one, ask your social worker or guardian ad litem (GAL). You can view your rights and the full laws by going to cfsa.dc.gov and clicking the **For Youth** tab at the top of the page.

Your Privacy

You have a right to know why you are in foster care, and you should know the agency and the people in charge of your case (your service team). They need to tell you what choices they are making for you. When you are old enough, they should invite you to meetings to help make those decisions.

Information about you and your case is private. Your social worker, GAL, and others involved in your case may not share what they know about you with people outside of the service team.

You can keep your personal belongings private as long as you are not breaking the law. You also have the right to privacy when making phone calls and using computers, unless supervision is necessary for safety.

Your Service Team

Your service team includes all of the people working on your case. You have a right to know how to reach your social worker, GAL, and others on your team. Your social worker should visit you regularly, and you should be able to count on them to answer your calls and other messages within a reasonable time. Your team is required to tell you when the court holds a hearing about your case, and they must support you in going to your court hearings if you want to go.

Your Treatment While in Care

You have a right to fair treatment and respect. No one may scare, bully, or abuse you. No one may punish you with hitting or other violence. No one may refuse to help you or disrespect you because of your race, color, religion, appearance, sexual orientation, or disability.

Adults are required to take good care of you. They need to watch out for you, help you think and act in positive ways, and support you in doing the things you like. They need to talk to you in a language you understand.

You have a right to speak up any time you are upset about where you live, how people treat you, or the help that you get. You have a right to know how to voice your concerns to the agency serving you. When you bring up an issue, people on your team and at CFSA must listen. They must work to take care of the problem as soon as possible. No one is allowed to punish you for speaking up.

Your Living Arrangements While in Care

You have the right to be involved in the decision about the family with whom you will live. While in foster care, you have a right to live in a safe, clean place. Your foster family should help you feel comfortable. Including you in family activities is one way for them to do that.

Your Activities

You should be allowed to continue going to the same school unless there is a good reason to change schools. Your team must make sure you have a safe way to get to and from places you need to go, such as:

- ▶ School;
- ▶ Extracurricular activities;
- ▶ Medical appointments;
- ▶ Job, internship, or volunteer activities;
- ▶ Family visits; and
- ▶ Other events you want or need to attend.

You have a right to your own religious beliefs. You may go to religious services you want to attend. You do not have to go to religious services against your beliefs.

Your Family

You have the right to stay in touch with your family and other people important to you. You should have regular visits and talk by phone or email. Whenever possible, you should live with your siblings while in care.

No one may punish you by keeping you from staying in touch with your family, other people important to you, or your service team. If you live in a group home, your family can get permission to talk to the group home staff. They are allowed to ask questions, and the group home staff should answer as soon as possible.

You will have these rights regarding your family unless your service team believes specific contacts are unsafe or harmful. If that is the case, you will need to stay within some limits. Keeping you safe must come first.

Your Health

You have a right to quality, consistent care from a doctor, dentist, and eye doctor. Your team must make sure you get counseling or help with alcohol or drug abuse if you need it. You are encouraged to speak up about what you need to stay healthy. You can ask the doctors treating you to talk with you about your health, and you may bring up any issues that you want to discuss.

You have a right to healthy food. If you don't eat certain foods for religious, health, or other reasons, adults should make meals that you can eat. Adults should also make sure you always have your own soap, toothpaste, and other personal care items to stay clean and healthy.

Your Belongings and Money

You have a right to bring clothes and other personal belongings into foster care. You can take all of your belongings with you if you move and when you leave foster care. While in care, adults must make sure you have enough clothes and shoes for each season; this includes uniforms for school or work. You have the right to make some choices about what you wear.

CFSA policy requires that youth between the ages of 15 and 21 who are placed in a foster home or congregate care setting receive a personal allowance of \$100 each month. If you enter a placement in the middle of the month, the amount of money is to be pro-rated, which means that it will be based on the number of days you are there.

This allowance should cover items you want to purchase outside of your basic needs. An adult cannot require you to use these funds to pay for essential items like food, clothing, school supplies, toiletries, or hygiene products. An adult may withhold the money if you don't meet behavioral, case planning, or household engagement criteria. If this happens and you disagree with the reason, you can contact your social worker and GAL to discuss the issue. Visit the CFSA website to view youth allowance-related documents to learn more.



Knowing how to manage money is a critical life skill. Your team will help you open a savings account and learn how to use it. When you turn 14, the team will help you check your personal credit report once a year. The risk of identity theft is real, so you want to make sure your credit report is right. The team will help you fix any problems you find.

Your Personal Information

You will receive important personal papers 30 days before leaving foster care at age 18 or older. These include the following documents:

- ▶ Social security card;
- ▶ Identification card;
- ▶ Birth certificate;
- ▶ Immigration records (if you have any);
- ▶ Health records and medical insurance information; and
- ▶ Education records.

If you leave foster care before you turn 18, your social worker will give these papers to your GAL or legal guardian.

What to Do If You're Unhappy with Child Welfare Services or Decisions

Talk to Your Service Team First:

- ▶ Talk to your social worker. Be clear about your concerns.
- ▶ Talk to others in the chain of command: your social worker's supervisor, program manager, or administrator. When you call a CFSA social worker and get their voicemail, their message will include their supervisor's name and telephone number. Start there.
- ▶ Talk to your GAL or others on your service team. Be clear about your concerns. Ask for their help in speaking up.

If there is no resolution from your service team, contact the CFSA Ombudsman.

Talk to CFSA's Ombudsman

The Office of the Ombudsman helps resolve conflicts and complaints about issues that affect CFSA children and families after working with the service team has not solved the problem.

The Ombudsman's office will:

- ▶ Conduct an informal investigation of complaints;
- ▶ Identify and think through options to resolve the issues;
- ▶ Encourage effective communication between the people involved;
- ▶ Offer referrals to other resources that can help; and
- ▶ Work with CFSA management about observed issues and trends.

What Does the Ombudsman's Office Not Do?

Because of the informal, neutral, confidential, and independent role of the CFSA Ombudsman's office, the Ombudsman does not:

- ▶ Make decisions for CFSA children and families, agency staff, or other individuals;
- ▶ Offer legal advice;
- ▶ Offer psychological counseling;
- ▶ Participate in formal investigations or play any role in court proceedings;
- ▶ Intervene in the decision-making process of clinicians; and
- ▶ Address concerns that are outside of CFSA's jurisdiction.

CFSA Ombudsman:

Marianna Abraham

Email: Marianna.Abraham@dc.gov

Website: cfsa.dc.gov/service/be-heard

Office Phone: (202) 727-2111

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Your Future

A critical part of growing up is getting ready for adulthood. You need a basic education, which includes kindergarten through high school. Your service team must ensure you are enrolled in school, and they should help you with anything you need to attend classes, learn, and graduate. They should help you participate in any sports, clubs, or other school activities that you want to experience. Your social worker should also help you get a driver's license or state ID card.

When you prepare to leave foster care, your team will work with you to write a transition plan. This plan will help you build a picture of how you will take care of yourself after foster care. You will identify what you must do now to get ready and how your team will help with that process. For example, you'll choose what to do after high school; this can include going to college, getting special training, or starting a job. Your team should make every effort to help you meet your goals.

LEGAL CITATIONS

This Bill of Rights is based on amendments to the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations, Title 29, PUBLIC WELFARE:

- ▶ Chapter 60, FOSTER HOMES, Section 6004.1
- ▶ Chapter 62, LICENSING OF YOUTH SHELTERS, RUNAWAY SHELTERS, EMERGENCY CARE FACILITIES, AND YOUTH GROUP HOMES, Section 6203
- ▶ Chapter 63, INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMS, Section 6303.1





D.C. Child and Family Services Agency

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