



Melissa Gutierrez grew up in and out of foster care. Years of instability bouncing from home to home, a series of failed reunifications and ultimately 'aging out' of foster care sparked a passion to reform the child welfare system. She is currently an Educational Liaison for the San Diego County Office of Education, Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program as well as a member of the National Foster Youth Alumni Policy Council. Melissa continues to advocate for systemic change with a focus on building long-term connections so that all youth can have loving, permanent families.

I'm "ALL-IN" because we must continue to make these important changes in the child welfare system:

1) The system needs to proactively seek all options for permanency.

We need a child welfare system that actively seeks out any and all options for youth permanency. Far too many youth languish in the system when there was an adult able to care for them, but was never reached out to. From the start of a case, workers should ask youth for their ideas of who can safely care for them. Relative searches, proactive outreach to potential homes and other permanency-seeking tools should be utilized as long as the youth is lacking a forever home, not just at the initial start of a case.

2) We need to make it easier for youth to achieve permanent connections.

Families often face significant bureaucratic obstacles and financial barriers to adoption and permanent connections with youth in care. We need to make it easier for those seeking to adopt by alleviating these challenges.

3) All youth deserve a forever home!

The child welfare system often uses language that labels and stigmatizes youth, which discourages their options for placement and, ultimately, long-term permanency. The system should utilize a trauma-informed approach in working with youth and families, recognizing their needs and trauma-response behaviors in an appropriate and compassionate way.



Aleks Talsky is a legal assistant at Michael Best & Friedrich. Aleks is a passionate child welfare advocate who serves on the advisory board for the National Association of Counsel for Children as well as the ACF- Youth Engagement Team for the Administration for Children and Families.

I'm "ALL-IN" because we must continue to make these important changes in the child welfare system:

1) Foster care is not meant to be a long-term solution, yet for far too many young people it is! The child welfare system should limit placement of children in foster care and prioritize keeping them safely with their families.

2) Young people deserve to have their voices heard and wishes granted! The negative outcomes and experiences of children in the child welfare system are serious and life changing. All children deserve the right to a high quality legal representative that will ensure their

voices are heard and the best outcome is achieved.

3) All Children deserve to have the opportunity to achieve success, yet only 3% of former foster youth graduate from college! Young people who are in and aging out of the foster care system often have lower college persistence and completion rates than their peers in higher education. Current federal law has helped to improve college accessibility for former foster youth, but students continue to face considerable challenges in continuing their education and completing their degrees. We must create, expand and evaluate support programs for students who are current and former foster youth.



Alex Oleson is currently a member of the Youth Engagement Committee for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) under Assistant Secretary Johnson and Associate Commissioner Milner. During this time, Alex will help inform the larger community on barriers to permanency under the “ALL-IN Foster Adoption Challenge”. Alex gains knowledge surrounding adoption from his own adoption, previous advocacy, as well as his adoptive parents who were foster/adoptive parents for over 35 years.

I’m “ALL-IN” because we must continue to make these important changes in the child welfare system:

1) Adoption isn’t the only way to ensure permanency, but it can be a great one.

I firmly believe that my own adoption and many other adoptions have had a positive impact on a young person's life. What is important is that they are nurtured, supported, and understood by whoever takes care of them.

2) We are more than a statistic

Longer stretches in the foster care system can be painful for young people. It can cause them to be put in situations that are not best for their futures. Interactions with the legal system and no support system can cause lasting trauma that **IS** preventable.

3) Young people need to have a voice!

By hearing from youth across the nation the Federal government will best be able to help young people with lived experience create sustainable solutions for youth and their families that come into contact with the child welfare system and ensure permanence more promptly



Justin Abbasi is a child welfare advocate who serves on the National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council. Justin has lobbied state and federal legislators to improve the child welfare system, particularly with regard to the mental health and homelessness outcomes faced by youth who age out of foster care. Justin spent seven years in foster care in South Carolina prior to attending Yale University where he received his B.S. Justin now studies medicine at UCLA and hopes to address the health disparities faced by current and former foster youth as a pediatrician.

Justin is “ALL-IN” because he believes in the following:

- 1) Every child deserves a family, regardless of the child’s, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability status.
- 2) The child welfare system must better recruit adoptive families who understand and represent the diverse backgrounds and needs of youth in foster care. Adoption agencies have an ethical obligation to promote diversity and inclusion in their practice, and the government should only support those that honor it. Being “ALL-IN” means leaving no one out.
- 3) Relational permanency promotes healing and prevents harm. States should consider adoption as a healthcare intervention for youth who want it and equip adoptive families to address their healthcare needs through trauma-informed care.



Joshua Christian Oswald is currently interning as the Youth Engagement Coordinator at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) under Assistant Secretary Johnson and Associate Commissioner Milner. During this time, Joshua's primary responsibilities include communicating with those with lived experience and engaging in both adoption and permanency initiatives. On September 4th, 2020 (as a 23 year old) Joshua was adopted into the Oswald family, and today he believes more strongly than ever that all young people deserve a permanent and loving family.

I'm "ALL-IN" because we must continue to make these important changes in the child welfare system:

- 1) Foster care is meant to be temporary, yet for far too many young people it isn't!**
We need a child welfare system that is geared towards primary prevention, that limits the use of foster care and more quickly helps families when their children do need to be placed in temporarily in foster care.
- 2) People believe that older youth in foster care cannot be adopted, but I'm proof they can!**
There are families all across America who want older youth to become a part of their forever family – we just need to offer them the right supports and services to be able to do that well.
- 3) Young people need to have a voice!**
Foster care is often scary and confusing. This is why it's important that children and youth in foster care have an attorney that can explain things and help them advocate for permanency and support. Attorneys help make sure their voices are heard, needs are met, and interests are protected.



Stephanie C. Márquez-Villafañe is a recognized community leader, entrepreneur and elected official. Born and raised in New Jersey, her primary areas of focus include education, community organizing, advocacy and policy creation and implementation. Set to be the first to graduate college in her family this December, Stephanie plans on continuing her advocacy and policy work to create systemic changes necessary to run the best child welfare system possible. She currently also serves on the National Policy Council for Youth and Alumni. Stephanie was adopted after turning 18 years old and has a younger brother who was adopted at a much younger age. Although Stephanie always believed every child deserves to find their permanent family home, now more than ever she understands the power and necessity to secure a happy and safe permanent home for every child.

Stephanie is “ALL-IN” because:

1) No child/youth should ever have to be in foster care until they age out!

But unfortunately, many are. This leaves many youths out to have to find themselves while being forced to navigate a world they likely were not prepared for.

2) Every child/youth has the right to a safe, happy and healthy permanent family home!

No child, much less a child in foster care, should have to be faced with living in a traumatic and possibly toxic environment. Every child has the right to be loved and properly taken care of and families that can provide such an environment have the right to welcome a child in.

3) Change is possible if we all team together!

If we all become “ALL-IN”, we will be able to permanently close the gap and match waiting children with a proper home!



Brittney Lee (pronouns: they/them) experienced seventeen foster homes in the span of about seventeen years during their childhood. The first ten homes Brittney experienced were within the span of less than two years, when they became a ward of the state at, and the age of two. This is one of the many reasons why they are “ALL-IN”. Today, at 26 years old, Brittney consistently involves themselves in community conversations on issues surrounding child welfare and engages in opportunities where they can increase their understanding on how to best leverage their experiences and meet their goals. One of those major goals is to

raise awareness about the racial disproportionalities in the child welfare system as well as to develop policies that more efficiently help youth prepare to age out of foster care. Brittney wishes to be the person that they needed when they were younger.

Brittney is “ALL-IN” because we must continue to make these important changes in the child welfare system:

- 1) **Across the nation Black foster youth experience foster care at rates so much higher than those of other races and they remain in the system longer.** These youth deserve the same cultural understandings and unbiased decisions around their placements, preventions from entering care and well-being that any other youth receive. We need to acknowledge that Black foster youth in America people have been disproportionately affected by the child welfare systems and offer them and their families the right supports and services to combat these inequalities and injustices.
- 2) **Young people and the teams of adults around them need sustained health education.** Mental health is largely stigmatized. Misinformation and ignorance can be very harmful especially for children experiencing trauma whose mental well beings need to be prioritized. If child welfare communities were not only more accurately informed but able to inform the adults/parents looking to foster or adopt then more children will have a chance at permanency and “forever” homes.
- 3) **Young people need to be involved in their own decision making!**
At certain age and developmental places in their lives we need to trust that young people know what they need best. Children are human beings and not cogs in the child welfare machine, or to be manipulated for the profit or gain of adults around them. They should be given options and opportunities to advocate for themselves and we should be giving them the tools to do so.



Courtney Canova is a national child welfare advocate. She has had numerous advocacy and employment roles that contribute to strengthening families and promoting child well-being. After advocating for child-focused adoption recruitment models, she currently serves on the Administration for Children and Families Youth Engagement Team to promote this work, among other national councils to inform best practice. Courtney aged out of foster care at age 18, while her younger sister remains a dependent in care. Now, more than ever, Courtney has the passion to assist youth across the country in finding a permanent home and social network where they know they belong.

I am ALL-IN so youth can navigate adulthood knowing they are not alone.

1) Foster care is temporary. Not for a lifetime.

We need a system geared towards supporting parents and youth thrive. If for whatever reason reunification is no longer an option, youth need every effort exhausted to find a forever family that will support them in maintaining connections with their biological, fictive kin and community members that support them. We need supportive adults to cheer us on during our achievements and a trusted shoulder to lean upon during times of adversity.

2) Connections are what make us a community.

Foster care impacts the whole community! We need a system that engages our local community members to be proactive in nurturing healthy environments for youth. Broken families and allowing youth to age out of the system without support is not acceptable. No one deserves to spend the holidays or face adulthood alone. It takes a village and all of us are a vital part of it. Be a mentor! Help youth know they belong.

3) Do not leave us out!

When in foster care, youth are often left in the dark about what is going to happen in their lives. Young people can provide valuable input in their wellbeing. When in the courtroom or during case planning, youth deserve to be at the center of the conversation. Whether it is strengthening their biological family unit, finding an adoptive family, or planning for their future. Ask us! Elevate our voices so we know we are safe, supported and loved.



Shimaine Quimbley-Holley spent time in Georgia foster care until she aged out at 21. Throughout Shimaine's transition she has worked as a Regional Coordinator, an active member of Policy Council and Elevated Minds. Currently Shimaine is the Regional Impact Liaison for MAAC/GA EmpowerMENT. Additionally, in 2017, she was given the opportunity to sit on the Foster Youth in Action's Leaders United Board. Before becoming an Outstanding Young Leader 2017, Shimaine was the recipient of the 2017 Nancy Cannon-O'Connell Outstanding Youth Leadership, The Georgia Conference 2017 Outstanding Youth Award, Foster Club 2018 Outstanding Youth Award and currently received A Shining Star Award from the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children 2019. Alliance for Children 2019. Throughout her growth 2019 was a magical year for her. Providing much needed training over The Adolescent Brain Development, Connecting Education to Workforce, Authentic Youth Engagement and more.

Filling her involvement being a Young Fellow with Anne E. Casey she went on to travel over 6 states to speak on ways to better systems using data and strategic planning. Throughout her growth Shimaine has recently joined the "ALL-IN" Foster Adoption Challenge and want to make sure each young person and each family has a stable plan and the resources to keep them connected.



Trent Taylor is honored to be serving as a member of the Youth Engagement Team at the Administration of Children and Families. Trent experienced sexual abuse, extreme neglect, and domestic violence during the first half of his childhood. After he traveled a horrific journey through the Foster Care System that ended in adoption at the age of nine, Trent healed from his traumatic past and has devoted his life to helping others overcome past trauma by providing hope. At the age of 19, Trent is in college pursuing a degree in clinical counseling, is an accomplished public speaker, serves as host of the Watch Me Rise podcast, has authored two books, and is the founder of Watch Me Rise LLC. Trent uses his past pain for a purpose as he continually strives to break misconceptions through public speaking. I'm "ALL-IN" because it is time that we break misconceptions that potentially keep people from adopting. We must educate people

regarding the following misconceptions and challenges:

1) Children and teens who have experienced trauma are able to come to dramatic levels of healing.

Let's be honest, we have all heard the negative stereotypes about those of us who have spent time in foster care. With trauma-informed support and true connection with a supportive adult or family, we can reach our goals and positively impact our world. This truth needs to be heard and understood by society.

2) Older children often desire a family as much as younger children.

A common misconception is that older children and young adults do not desire the permanency of a forever family. Although it may look different at times, teens and young adults do desire connection and a sense of belonging and can thrive in adoptive placements when proper supports are present.

3) Children and teens are lingering in foster care for far too long.

With each new placement comes additional fear and an increased inability to form long-term attachments. Every child deserves permanency in a timely manner.



Ryan Young is an international adoptee, former foster youth turned into a fierce advocate for his peers in and out of the foster care system has the distinguished honor of serving as a Young Leader at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) selected by the Assistant Secretary Lynn A. Johnson. Ryan currently serves as the Vice President to Arizona's Department of Child Safety Youth Empowerment Council where he meets with DCS Leadership and young people all across Arizona to transform the child welfare

system through policy changes, meaningful conversations led by youth, and invitations to various events to share stories about experiences and efforts towards intentional systemic transformation with our young people at the table with leaders. He also serves as a Federal NYTD Reviewer at JBS International, Chair of Arizona's Chapter at Foster Care Alumni of America and an Arizona Delegate for National Foster Youth Institute. Ryan's primary focus and responsibilities include communicating with other Young Leaders with lived experience across the country and engaging in both adoption and permanency initiatives including but not limited to speaking at National roundtables, increasing social media engagement about permanency efforts, and ensuring we reduce the amount of awaiting youth and young adults who are longing for permanent, and loving families. On June 17, 2019, Ryan aged out of Arizona's child welfare system at age 18 without a loving, and permanent family. Ryan strongly feels that every child deserves to be with a biological or chosen family, and if that isn't possible; other permanency supports and connections should be in place chosen by the youth.

I'm "ALL-IN" because we must continue to make these important changes in the child welfare system:

1) Foster care as it was created to be used as last resort, primary prevention practice as a focus on child welfare systems!

We need a child welfare system that is tailored towards preventing the entry and re-entry of youth, less involvement of families in child welfare solely on the basis of poverty, race and other factors, and reimaging a child well-being system where families and youth can thrive.

2) Every child deserves a permanent, loving family; and the young person's age shouldn't disqualify them towards being adopted!

We need to work with families who are looking to adopt and to accept youth of any age because far too many older youth age out of the system without a loving family to call home, without supports in place and being loved should be unconditional – regardless of age. We all deserve to be loved and have a home to go to!

3) Young people should have opportunities to speak about their lived-experiences at all levels of the decision-planning process and be compensated for their time, efforts, and expertise!

Young people who experience the foster care system and choose to share their story, time, and experiences should have opportunities to share them. While most foster youth advocates work on a volunteer basis; their time and expertise should be as valuable as the adults in the child welfare systems and therefore compensated for their advocacy efforts.



Veronica Krupnick is the Foster Youth Advocacy Program Coordinator at CASA First, a local CASA office in New Mexico. Through her role, she is able to offer direct peer to peer support for current foster youth. She is also able to provide education to CASA volunteers, participate in community outreach and policy advocacy. Veronica was adopted at 10 years old and has grown up in a multi-cultural home. She believes all children and youth deserve to have a loving family where their identity, culture and background are respected and honored.

I'm "All-In" because:

1) Young people deserve to have a loving home

Whether it is through reunifying with their families, living with extended family, being adopted and welcomed into a new family, etc., young people deserve to feel loved, supported and to have a permanent home and family.

2) Young people should be able to remain connected to their communities and culture!

Being removed from your home is a traumatizing experience, and it can be very jarring and confusing to be placed in a culture different from your own. We need to support young people in maintaining ties and connection to their communities and culture, this will look different for each youth.

3) Young people deserve lifelong and meaningful connections

Adoption may not always be right for every youth, but this does not mean they don't deserve lasting support systems and meaningful connections. For many youth, having mentors, positive adults and natural connections in their life can make all the difference.