Centering Lived Experiences in Child Welfare Transformation

Annual Report 2023
# Table of Contents

A Message from the Founder ........................................... 1

2023 Highlights .......................................................... 2

Embedding Impacted Youth into Policymaking and Practice 3
- A Blueprint for Integrating Lived Experience .............. 3
- Court Settlement Enlists Impacted Youth in Co-Designing System Improvements 6

Building Better Systems to Serve Youth and Families 8
- Keeping Youth Connected to their Loved Ones by Advancing Kinship Care 8
- Parents Informing a Prevention Initiative ................ 11
- Guiding the Federal Agenda with Data on Youth Needs 11
- Pushing for Better Data and Oversight of Group Facilities 12

Improving Direct Service with Human-Centered Tech 13
- Creating a Feedback Loop to Pilot New Solutions .... 13

Painting the Full Picture with Research ...................... 15

Financial Health ......................................................... 16

Thank You ................................................................. 17
Dear community,

At age 15, standing at a bus stop after two years of couch surfing and struggling to get back into the foster care system, I prayed. I asked God to use my life in a way that would contribute to creating solutions. Solutions that could have answered my prayers from those painful times. That moment at the bus stop marked the realization that my pain was a part of my life’s purpose.

As I reflect on what’s changed in the child welfare space since then, I’m excited about the foundational shifts improving the system. Under President Barack Obama, legislation was passed directing focus to the healthy development and well-being of children in care, establishing a new moral mandate for the system. With President Donald Trump, the work continued. Laws were enacted to curb foster care entries. And under President Joe Biden, the call of advocates to place children with extended family members picked up steam. These rapid and profound changes have reshaped policies, but, most importantly, our idea of what’s possible.

My hope is that improvement efforts are rooted in an approach that ensures youth will have a better chance at growing up in safe and loving homes. That approach is listening: to youth, to families, to caregivers, and to people who work in child welfare. And then delivering results. Centering their lived experiences is not just a matter of empathy; it’s a strategic choice that ensures proposed solutions solve actual problems. This approach has been the North Star for Think of Us from day one.

I’m grateful to the Think of Us team, our board, our funders, allies, and all the people with lived experience who ground our work. Your support is helping us ensure children and families experiencing foster care thrive. And making my dream of playing a role in a better child welfare system a reality.

Read on for a deeper look into our impact in 2023!

Sixto Cancel,  
Founder & Chief Executive Officer  
Think of Us
Youth, parents, and caregivers know the system best because they’re the ones living with it. In 2023, we continued following their lead.

5,948 Youth, Parents, & Caregivers Engaged

We engaged 5,948 youth, parents, and caregivers impacted by the child welfare through our research, surveys, in-person engagements, and Virtual Support Services. In 2023, these engagements informed the Children’s Bureau’s work plan to support youth as they transition from foster care to independence, improved coordination across relevant federal agencies, helped to expand food assistance for former foster youth, and shaped historic changes to kinship regulations. To date, our work has been shaped by over 49,430 people with lived experience in the child welfare system.

2,279 Youth, Parents, & Caregivers Participated in Research

2,279 youth, caregivers, and parents impacted by the child welfare system participated in our research studies, surveys, and in-person engagements. Their perspectives are informing kinship care expansion in New Hampshire, Indiana, and California, creating a new role for lived experts in court oversight, helping five states engage youth in foster care in the decisions that most affect them, and supporting child welfare prevention initiatives.

7,099 Responses to Requests

We responded to 7,099 requests on behalf of 3,669 families – helping them access over $50 million in resources. Our Virtual Support Services team connects youth and families impacted by the child welfare system to resources like housing, transportation, clothing, mental health support, and more. In California, our team has supported the state’s expansion of kinship care by helping kin caregivers access resources to support their growing families.

57 Congressional Offices

We met with 57 congressional offices across both parties from 29 states, three White House offices, and four federal agencies.
Embedding Impacted Youth into Policymaking and Practice

A Blueprint for Integrating Lived Experience

Last February, Think of Us convened 20 youth ambassadors alongside the Children’s Bureau to discuss which child welfare issues they believed needed urgent attention. This work is creating a new model for lived expert engagement. Moving beyond simply telling their personal stories, the ambassadors focused on representing their larger communities as experts and advisors, working hand-in-hand with Children’s Bureau staff to co-design the agency’s work in 2023.

Throughout the convening I felt like a true partner at the table... there was intentional, authentic collaboration. It’s a paradigm shift in the way we are being viewed: as partners in the work, not just people to extract information from.

– Youth Ambassador

Here’s what this new model looked like:

- Think of Us worked with partner organizations nationwide to identify 20 youth and young adult ambassadors from 14 states with lived experience in foster care.

- To prepare for the convening, the ambassadors participated in listening sessions, reviewed policy reports, and examined ideas crowdsourced from advocates, practitioners, and people with lived experience. With this knowledge and their own lived experience in hand, the ambassadors partnered with agency staff for three rounds of strategic design sessions.
Embedding Impacted Youth into Policymaking and Practice

- Partners such as the Foster Club, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI), iFoster, Chaplin Hall, Journey to Success Campaign, and others shared their knowledge and experience. Think of Us worked with the ambassadors to prepare a literature review. In sum, 58 policy advocates, practitioners, and people with lived experience in the child welfare system contributed more than 200 policy ideas.

- In February 2023, Think of Us held an in-person meeting with the Children’s Bureau staff and youth ambassadors. Participants engaged in discussions, reflections, brainstorming sessions, and debates about key issues and themes. Ambassadors worked with the Children’s Bureau to inform and prioritize the agency’s work plan as experts, with only about 25% choosing to share their personal stories.

- Think of Us’ Center for Lived Experience published a report, Exploring Federal Supports for Transition-Age Youth, containing the ambassadors’ recommendations and including insight into the design and rationale for the convening so others have guidelines on how to:
  - Lead an advocacy campaign based on what’s important.
  - Implement these insights and recommendations in states.
  - Re-purpose this information to inspire reports, research, advocacy activities, roundtables, events, and more.
  - Convene people with lived experience to identify their priorities.
  - Infuse lived experience in new and different ways by creating and implementing feedback loops.

- In May, Think of Us hosted the National Town Hall on Interagency Investments for Transition-Age Youth, bringing together officials from the Children’s Bureau, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to discuss coordinating federal responses to meet the needs of youth as they transition out of foster care. This was the first time these agencies convened publicly about the needs of these transition-age youth. This event was inspired and driven by the ambassadors’ work, several of whom were featured as speakers. People RSVP’d to the live event from all 50 states and several tribes. The event has been viewed over 800 times.
Knowledge is power and experts with lived experience need to be leading the conversation on how to move forward with our nation’s reform. Through our work with the legislative branch, CCAI was glad to be part of the community led by Think of Us to collaborate with the executive branch to uplift and empower these experts as federal momentum drivers.

– Kate McLean
Executive Director, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

We hope that this convening will help the ecosystem deepen the engagement and integration of lived experts in the policy process. This work builds on the tireless efforts of the many people who fight to give impacted communities a seat at the table.

Working alongside (Associate Commissioner) Aysha (E. Schomburg) and her remarkable team is an ambassador’s dream brought to life – a harmonious symphony of grace and talent. I feel as though I was blessed to have this opportunity. She is a powerful woman and a great leader – definitely someone that is an example to me.

– Youth Ambassador

Crowdsourcing Think of Us wanted to provide ambassadors a grounding in the potential policies being discussed at the federal level to ensure they felt comfortable engaging with policymakers.

To that end, we put out a call to policy advocates and practitioners to crowdsource ideas for potential actions the Children’s Bureau could take to improve the outcomes and experiences of older youth in foster care. We compiled the responses we received into a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, list of options for advocates to consider.

The document was shared with ambassadors, who were then given the opportunity to comment on or add to the ideas contained therein. They were encouraged to use it as a tool to expand their beliefs about what is possible, but were cautioned to not limit their ideas to only what had been presented. (p35)
Court Settlement Enlists Impacted Youth in Co-Designing System Improvements

In 2020, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) in Washington State entered a settlement agreement known as the D.S. V. DCYF settlement agreement. Traditional settlement agreements mandate state or tribal leaders fix the problems identified by the court. This settlement brings a new precedent — requiring the state to incorporate qualitative research from foster youth in designing solutions.

- Children’s Rights and Disability Rights WA brought a lawsuit on behalf of youth served by Washington’s child welfare system, claiming they were not provided with stable housing, their needs weren’t properly assessed, and the state was not making sufficient efforts to reunify families. The court found in favor of the youth.

- The settlement agreement created a new Stakeholder Facilitator role to engage adversely impacted people to design and hold oversight over the state’s improvements.

- We engaged a group of 69 young people from across the state — including youth from marginalized communities, those with cognitive and physical disabilities, neurodiverse youth, and LGBTQIA youth — to share their experiences and offer solutions. DCYF published a matrix identifying the next steps planned for each recommendation.

- To promote the adoption of these recommendations, we took additional steps, including:
  1. Developing a report that was released on a public website by DCYF;
  2. Presenting our findings via a public webinar for state leaders and stakeholders;
  3. Engaging state child welfare administrative leadership and field staff to support their prioritization of recommendations; and
  4. Sharing findings with a joint meeting of the state’s largest child welfare and youth homelessness coalitions to strategize on how the powerful words we captured from Washington’s young people can lead to real change.
This settlement process creates a powerful new legal mechanism to ensure that child welfare class action settlements generate better outcomes for the youth and families impacted. This model has already been replicated in a similar settlement process, where we advised Disability Rights Oregon, which took on the role of Stakeholder Facilitator in Oregon. Word has spread, and multiple organizations are considering a similar approach in other states and have contacted us for guidance, setting a new precedent for how to include those affected by the problem in building the solution.

Below is a snapshot of the recommendations matrix created by WA DCYF. The matrix illustrates how the state is incorporating each recommendation from impacted youth into their implementation plans:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation number</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>In Scope 4.10 Youth Engagement Unit - Page 4 in implementation plan</th>
<th>In Scope 4.11 Family Group Meeting - Page # in Implementation Plan</th>
<th>In Scope 4.12 Transitions and Referrals - Page # in Implementation Plan</th>
<th>Out of scope/Next step</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Ask young people about their placement needs to better understand and consider their histories and identities when identifying potential placements</td>
<td>Pg. 44, 45</td>
<td>Pg. 55</td>
<td>Pg. 60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1</td>
<td>Ask young people regularly about where they want to live and strive to place them in their preferred placement</td>
<td>Pg. 44, 46</td>
<td>Pg. 52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2</td>
<td>If young people can’t be placed where they want to live, give them an explanation as to why</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pg. 46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.3</td>
<td>Give young people options for placement and allow them to choose</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pg. 46</td>
<td></td>
<td>Youth and families need to know information and placement options, but their preferred placement may not be an option or available. Trainings are offered to support how to engage difficult conversations. This recommendation will be shared with the appropriate program manager/division.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Decades of research show that children in foster care fare better when placed with relatives and other adults with a close, family-like relationship. Their lives are safer and more stable, they have better mental health, and they are more likely to graduate high school on time. Despite this evidence, the foster care system has yet to be designed to prioritize kin placement, which only occurs 35% of the time. We believe kinship placements can and should be drastically increased, and we are proud to be working with a coalition of partners and lived experts to make this a reality.

New federal regulations published last fall make it easier for states and tribes to access federal funding to support kinship caregivers with the same resources provided to non-kin foster homes, including monthly financial support. The White House estimates this will unlock $3 billion in federal funding to support kinship families over the next ten years.

We would like to thank our partners in this work, whose coordinated efforts made these outcomes possible.

The following partners contributed to the kin-specific standards:
Timeline of New Kin-First Rules and Think of Us’ Contribution:

2019

Fall: Think of Us funds Marina Nitze as a fellow to understand the barriers to kinship placement. This work is ongoing and has grown to include 40 states and tribes and 45 agencies and built a solid practical knowledge base that continues to inform kinship expansion nationwide.

2021

December: Early in the Biden administration, Think of Us gathers young people with foster care experience to inform the Children’s Bureau’s strategic plan. Their strong support for kinship helped establish this as a key goal.


2023

February: The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) releases notice of proposed rulemaking for public commentary on kin-specific licensing.

February–April: Think of Us collaborates with our partners to drive support for the rule, leading to 157 comments, including support from nine members of Congress, more than 20 states, six tribes, and more than 40 child welfare organizations.

March: Think of Us co-hosts a national webinar to inform the child welfare field about the proposed rules and answer questions raised by advocates and administrators.

Spring–Summer: Think of Us collaborates with partners to speak directly with leaders in 45 jurisdictions and more than 100 kin caregivers to inform model standards for kin-specific licensure.

September: ACF finalizes the kin-specific licensure rule.

October: Along with our partners, Think of Us released Kin-Specific Foster Home Approval: Recommended Standards of National Organizations. This document guides states in implementing the new changes.

October: Think of Us presents on a webinar to launch new model standards hosted by the Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center.

Fall–Winter: Think of Us and our partners began supporting six jurisdictions to pilot the new model standards as they look to make kinship the norm across their system, setting the blueprint for the US. Nearly every Title IV-E agency wants to adopt the kin-specific model standards in the next two years.
Building Better Systems to Serve Youth and Families

Parents Informing a Prevention Initiative

Historically, the child welfare system has been charged primarily with evaluating families instead of providing them with the help they need. In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act expanded funding availability so that states can use prevention-focused funds to support families at imminent risk of entering foster care. In other words, if a family needs help heating their home, the system can help cover the gas bill.

To leverage this, Think of Us is partnering with the Doris Duke Foundation, Foster America, Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab, and Chapin Hall to pilot solutions to proactively connect families to the services and supports they need — such as food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare. This new initiative, The Opportunities for Prevention & Transformation Initiative (or Opt-in For Families) aims to demonstrate that actively connecting families to coordinated support services in their communities—along with cash or material supports—is a cost-effective, scalable way to prevent abuse and neglect.

To ensure the design of the pilots meet the needs of impacted parents, Think of Us partnered with the Children’s Trust Fund Alliance’s Birth Parent National Network to connect us to parent networks across the country. We collected insights from 243 parents and worked closely with 15 parents impacted by child welfare to create a vision for a system that works to strengthen families via the pilot projects. We published their insights in a report of key recommendations. One recommendation that has been incorporated into the pilot’s design is reducing Child Protective Services’ role at the primary entry point for the system, regardless of the specific needs and circumstances of the family, and instead building community-level pathways that include peer partners with lived experience.

As we reflect on the year’s progress, it’s evident that learning from and building with those who have been impacted by the system is not merely a component but a cornerstone of our work. It is also clear that the way we execute our work and nurture those involved is just as important. The collaborative approach of Think of Us exemplifies authentic engagement. Particularly heartening was witnessing their direct service program, Virtual Support Services, deploy frontline staff to offer resource navigation for parents chosen to provide feedback on Opt-in for Families and those who applied but were not selected. This is why we champion funding such additional supports. Engaging individuals in our mission is vital, but building and maintaining a supportive infrastructure for them is what truly embodies our commitment.

— JooYeun Chang, Program Director for Child Well-Being, Doris Duke Foundation

(Parent partners) have a clear understanding of systems because of their own personal journeys. They can walk alongside a parent in a way that others cannot and are able to build a special bond. A connection with a parent partner can help the parent/caregiver to access culturally responsive resources and prevent system involvement.

— Parent and Peer Support Provider
Guiding the Federal Agenda with Data on Youth Needs

Youth and families impacted by child welfare face challenges such as food and housing insecurity and joblessness at rates much higher than most other groups. We work to not only transform the child welfare system, but also ensure that all federal agencies that support youth and families coordinate with one another to meet the specific needs of this population.

In 2022, the White House had its first convening in over 50 years on hunger — a historic moment following dramatic increases in food insecurity during the pandemic. Think of Us provided the Biden administration, congressional leaders, and top policymakers at HHS and USDA with data on high rates of both food insecurity and underemployment among youth who have experienced foster care. Over the past three years, this data was collected through our Virtual Support Services and microcash grant surveys.

Following this conference and inspired by the insights from this data, when the Biden administration was negotiating the bipartisan Fiscal Responsibility Act, they advocated for special exemptions for foster youth. The law contains a provision exempting youth who reached the age of majority while in foster care from work requirements to receive food assistance (SNAP). This will increase food assistance to thousands of vulnerable youth and help to strengthen the precedent that all human services agencies must coordinate to meet the needs of youth and families impacted by child welfare.

Since the passage of the bill, we have continued working directly and with partners to support the successful implementation of the law.

- Together with our partners, we worked to inform the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service in developing regulatory language and a Q&A guide for the states.
- We worked with child welfare and nutrition partner organizations to host a webinar for state SNAP staff and advocates to help them understand the unique needs of youth from foster care.
- We co-produced a brief with the Food Research & Action Center about implementing new exemptions.
Pushing for Better Data and Oversight of Group Facilities

In April 2023, Sixto joined U.S. Sens. Jeff Merkley (D-OR), John Cornyn (R-TX), Tommy Tuberville (R-AL) and U.S. Reps. Ro Khanna (D-CA) and Buddy Carter (R-GA), along with Paris Hilton and other survivors of institutional abuse, for a news conference to uplift the introduction of the bipartisan Stop Institutional Child Abuse Act (SICAA).

Over the last two years, Think of Us has worked with advocates and members of Congress to help revise and shape this bill to provide data necessary for future reforms. If enacted, this bill will establish an interagency working group to examine data and produce tools to improve oversight and prevent abuse of children in youth residential facilities, laying the groundwork for future change. Driving truly transformational change requires a deep, nuanced understanding of the realities of institutional care, drawn from data that centers the expertise of people who have lived through it.
Improving Direct Service with Human-Centered Tech

Creating a Feedback Loop to Uncover New Solutions

Our Virtual Support Services (VSS) team continues to connect youth and families impacted by foster care to resources like housing assistance, food, child care, transportation, and more. VSS is illustrating a streamlined, accessible approach to resource navigation, blending technology and human support to help people meet their immediate needs. We listen, identify solutions, complete paperwork for youth and families, and follow-up to ensure resources are leveraged.

Thank you for your help! Sabra (Think of US team member), I just would like to let you know I really appreciate the time and effort that you have put into helping our family. I have never encountered another program that has ever helped us and it’s taking the time to listen to some of our needs and help us… The THINK OF US Program has really lifted up our hope and spirit.

– Kinship Caregiver and VSS Help-Seeker

Key Resource Partners

We would like to thank these amazing partner organizations who provided substantial support to our help-seekers in 2023:

**One Simple Wish**: 434 Wishes Fulfilled in 2023. Total value of services: $63,245.

**Echoes of Hope**: Responded to 132 requests from caregivers to help support 256 children in their care. Total value of services: $47,272.75.

**The Change Reaction**: Responded to 20 requests from help seekers. Total value of funds distributed: $19,332.67.
In 2023, our team addressed 7,099 requests, connecting 3,669 families with resources. The total cash value of these resources was over $50 million, an average of over $13,600 per family. VSS is currently available in California, Georgia, and the Greater Boston Area.

Additionally, VSS is building a national network, our Partner Collaborative, to supplement local resource gaps. We collect data on urgent needs not being met by existing resources — including barriers to program enrollment, service gaps, and how emergent conditions such as COVID-19 or price inflation impact families. This information is provided to state and national leaders to inform evidence-based decision-making. For example, VSS data helps California administrators create data-informed reimbursement rates for caregivers based on the specific needs of families. In California, VSS serves the role of statewide Kinship Navigator — helping kinship families access services and understand the support systems available to them.

_Echoes of Hope is thrilled to endorse our ongoing partnership with Think of Us. What sets this partnership apart is the organization’s deep dedication, passion, and genuine care for creating impactful results. We feel blessed to work in partnership with such an amazing and supportive team and we are continually inspired by the positive change they bring to those they serve._

— Nicole Knosp-Guiral
CEO, Echoes of Hope
We can’t solve a problem we can’t see. Child welfare data often does not tell the whole story of the system’s impact. It is critical to understand the government’s statistics, which tell us how many kids are in the system, for how long, at what ages, and in what type of placement. In addition, we must have a more nuanced understanding of exactly why youth and families are in crisis, what specific needs they have, the impacts of existing interventions, and the opportunities that are being missed. Without this, leaders at every level of the child welfare system have no clear pathway to devise a better system.

- **Helping States Create a Kin–First System:** We interviewed frontline staff, kinship caregivers, and youth in foster care in New Hampshire, Indiana, and California to better understand these states’ strengths and barriers to kinship placement. Several research participants spoke highly of their experience participating in this project. We gave a virtual statewide presentation and presented in person at two influential symposia in California to help ensure the findings and recommendations of the lived experts who participated in the study will be put into action. There was praise for the research team, who were easy to work with, understood the work, and “knew just how to ask the right questions.” Angie Schwartz, Deputy Director of the Children and Family Services Division, CADSS, requested Think of Us to engage every CA county in the state.

Our work doesn’t stop when we complete a study. We consistently share the stories we learn and the expertise we gain with lawmakers, providers, social workers, advocates, and administrators. The aggregate of this work enables us to provide sector partners with a perspective available nowhere else. We are currently building a digital tool that will allow leaders and advocates throughout the system to access insights derived from this body of work.

This stack of files shared by a study participant demonstrates the enormous amount of paperwork required by prospective kinship caregivers to be considered for licensure as a foster parent.
In 2023, Think of Us launched an audacious five-year plan to transform the child welfare system in collaboration with the many partners mentioned throughout this report. Our vision is ambitious but straightforward:

By centering lived experience in the design of the system, we can substantially increase kinship placements, reduce unnecessary entries into foster care, and help young people successfully transition from foster care to adulthood.

Partners and funding flows are beginning to coalesce around these goals, creating a generational opportunity for a new and vastly improved child welfare system. Now is the time to double down.

Collaboration with both long-standing child welfare funders and new actors will be instrumental in bringing this vision to life. Through The Audacious Project – a big-bet funding initiative of TED – we were thrilled not only to have raised roughly half of our $97 million, five-year budget, but also to have brought more than ten of the nation’s leading philanthropists into the fold. Think of Us enters 2024 in a healthy financial position, poised to scale our organization and impact.

We are also clear-eyed about the resources needed in order to capitalize on the opportunity ahead. The philanthropic sector has an instrumental role to play in shifting the over $30 billion per year currently spent on child welfare in the United States. This moment calls for us, collectively, to act with a sense of urgency. For those who wish to meet the moment, Think of Us is well-positioned to channel resources to set the system up for large-scale change that endures for many years to come.
Think of Us remains committed to working with our partners to reduce the number of youth in foster care, place youth who do need to be removed from immediate family for abuse or willful neglect with adults they know and trust, and to help youth leaving foster care thrive.

We learned a lot in 2023 – from our child welfare reform partners, policymakers, and those who work in and experience child welfare. All of our work has been made better for it. Together, we are building a system that will strengthen and support millions of youth and families in the coming years.

We want to express the deepest gratitude to the many lived experts, advocates, leaders, practitioners, and funders who partner with us in this work, and to those many more who have been driving this work forward for decades.

Thank you!