

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Away From Home – Sharing the Impacts of Institutional Care TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Sixto Cancel, Think Of Us; Sarah Sullivan, Think Of Us; Sarah Fathallah, Think Of Us

[Music Introduction] [00:00:00]:

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:02]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:31]: Thanks so much for joining us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates. In this episode, we're going to dive into institutional foster care, which has different meanings and interpretations across the field. It's a conversation with the team from Think of Us who developed a report sharing the impacts institutional placements had on youth. Now, really the report, which is titled *Away From Home*, is told from the youth, but told in a unique way. These alumni of institutional care shared their emotion in ways beyond typical testimonial, but through art or artifacts or other creative outlets called cultural probes. Now, before we go any further, I actually want to share you an example of what we're talking about. This is a poem written by a participant in the *Away From Home* report who recently experienced an institutional placement in foster care. And this is what they responded to with when they were asked, what would you say at a hypothetical open mic night about your time in an institutional placement? The poem is titled *That Child*. And it's read by Sarah Sullivan from Think of Us.

SARAH SULLIVAN [00:01:49]: The perfect foster child, everyone wanted in their home, but no one wanted to nurture that foster child. Only good enough to show off, but not worthy of love and care from those trusted with her care. Fighting for full custody of her life, fighting for respect. A privilege never before had. His foster child is shunned, shushed, ignored, and made a void wondering what the perfect foster child did so wrong. She just followed the image, the pedestal her foster parents and our social workers had. Hidden when inconvenient, lifted up when vital, tokenized for funding, penalized for truth speaking, may as well have been the same psychological warfare before care. Different rules, same fool. Learning to ride the ocean of the foster care system. Surviving the same beach as what was home before care, just a different wave. The pedestal always within reach, but the strings have restrictions. The prize was freedom, the restriction was life.

TOM OATES [00:03:03]: So, in this episode, we are joined by Sixto Cancel, CEO and founder of Think of Us, along with Sarah Sullivan who you just heard, and Sarah Fathallah who co authored the report. We dive into what the report attempts to share, but also aspects of institutional care that the team feels should be revisited. But also - and this aligns to many of the recent conversations we've had on the podcast - how working with and really involving lived experience can look. The foster care alumni had a greater role in the report beyond just contributing their cultural probe and their willingness to be interviewed. They had power and influence throughout the report's development. So, we're glad to have the team from Think of Us back on the podcast. They are always so willing to spend time with us. So, let's get right to it, talking about the *Away From Home* report and sharing the impacts of institutional care here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Sarah and Sixto, welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. And well, let's just kick it off from the top. Do me a favor and just start from the beginning and what is *Away From Home*?

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SARAH SULLIVAN [00:04:18]: Hey, thank you so much for having us, Tom, my name's Sarah Sullivan and I was the project lead on Away From Home and I'm so happy to be here with our research lead Sarah Fathallah and co author and then of course Sixto Cancel, the founder of Think of Us. What is Away From Home is a research project that started in the spring of 2020. And basically, a lot of the events of 2020 had gotten leaders in child welfare to really reconsider the long-held policy of putting some youth in foster care, not with families or with kinships, but in institutional placements. And while there has been a growing movement, kind of looking to re-examine these placements and a body of academic literature pointing out different elements of harms, what really felt like was missing from the conversation was a recent understanding of what young people who had recently lived in these places felt and had to say about them. What were their experiences like? What were their mental models? And how did they think about these places and how did they think about reforming these places?

[00:05:22]: So, Think of Us went on a journey in spring of 2020 to talk to 78 young people who had recently lived in these places. Everyone was an adult and out of care. They were ages 18 to 25, but all, while they had been in foster care, had lived in institutional placements. And we talked to a wide range from over 30 states and people who had experienced different kinds of institutional placements in foster care. And what really emerged from these conversations - we had interviews and we also did cultural probe activities which you'll hear, I'm sure a little bit more about later where we tried to get the artistic and creative expressions from young people. So, going beyond just talking, but actually getting other ways that we could understand their experiences. And what began to emerge is a portrait of what people have recently experienced in these places that we ultimately published in the work known as Away From Home youth experiences of institutional placements that foster care published by Think of Us and - which Sarah and I authored - and that published in July of this year and it's led to some really exciting conversations.

TOM OATES [00:06:30]: You bring up 2020, which just brings up so much. But you know, that was following the Family First Prevention Services Act, which addressed institutional care. Plus, you had 2020 and all the risks and everyone understood of COVID-19, plus the greater reckoning that I think child welfare was having or is having with itself on systemic racism, which points to some of the problems with institutional care. So, all of these conversations are already going on. And so, with the, I guess you could say that general shift or the agreement to shift potentially from institutional foster homes and group homes - why this report, to add on to all that, when the momentum looked like it was, it's already moving in that direction?

SIXTO CANCEL [00:07:20]: For us, it's an equity issue. When you talk about who was experiencing the hardest experiences, I think one of those groups of folks are people who are in institutional placements. The purpose of child welfare is to reunite you or to expand your family through adoption or through other means. And what we're seeing is that young people who are in these institutional placements are not experiencing that. And in many times, these are folks who tend to be thought of last when we're thinking about different types of reform. I will say that there has been movement, right? But the reality is, is that the movement that you see in the legislation that just passed in Family First is not enough. And the argument here is not about institutional placements. It's about, are we actually providing young people the opportunity to heal and to be embedded in a forever family, to be loved beyond a contractual agreement - that is the discussion.

TOM OATES [00:08:19]: So, then pulling that apart, if you're really trying to have that discussion, who was the report really for? When you guys were writing this, who was your intended audience?

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SIXTO CANCEL [00:08:32]: When we initially were writing this, it was to inform the foundations of what were the experiences that young people were having in these placements because their voice and their perspectives was missing from the conversation. But then when we actually went to publish this report, it was just to tell the truth. I think what's missing in our field is how do you actually tell the truth about what people are experiencing, the lived experience, without the manipulation for an agenda. Draw your conclusions from there. And that's why you see that out of 150 pages, that most of that, those pages are about what young people and people with lived experience said versus what our recommendations are. And we only have a tiny few pages on recommendations because I honestly hope that people are inspired to draw their own conclusions based on what they heard directly from lived experience.

TOM OATES [00:09:26]: So, this gets into the idea of, you know, you talk about making up your own mind, listening to the, the, the perspectives, especially from those young people. So, what about where we currently are when it comes to perspectives? And I'd be curious to get your take on those perspectives within child welfare across the field on maybe the reasons of what somebody may consider benefits or, or problems. We think about institutional placements, what are we currently perceiving? And, you know, where's our mind versus where is reality? Maybe that'd be the best way to talk about like the perspectives that child welfare has across institutional placements.

SARAH SULLIVAN [00:10:14]: One thing was really interesting as a result of doing this work is that we, we feel like we landed on what seems to be one of the deepest mental models that currently exists - both among young people and then among the ecosystem as a whole. Which is that young people we spoke to had predominantly - not solely but predominantly - had a very deep mental model that institutional placements in foster care exist because there's literally nowhere else to go. So, toward the end of our 90-minute interviews, we tried to talk about all sorts of things from what kind of food you ate while you lived there too, what school was like when you lived there and you know what your sleeping arrangements were like and what kind of relationships you had. And at the end of the interview, we spoke about what did you think about these places as a whole? And should they stay exactly the same or should we change them?

[00:11:06]: And despite young people predominantly telling us very painful, very troubling stories over the course of the interview, by the time that we got to the end, we talked to many young people who at first glance thought that we couldn't change it, that we couldn't get rid of these places. And when we, we started dedicating more time at the end of the interview to start to really unpacking what young people were really telling us. And it took us some time as a team and we had to do lots of debriefs and coordinate with each other. And finally, what we feel we got to is that there really is this deep mental model that when we ask the question, should group homes go away, what young people are perceiving we're asking is, should more youth be homeless? That's the question that's coming in because they've been so ingrained and told to believe that group homes exist because there's literally nowhere else to go, that the question they're perceiving in spirit is, should we put more youth on the street? And so, of course that answer is no. Of course, we should not put more foster youth on the streets. The question is, could there be other family-based alternatives to institutions? And if there could be, would you prefer that?

[00:12:23]: Well then, for that, we started getting oh, yeah. I would prefer that. I would prefer, I would have preferred to have been in a family. I just was told that that was no option. So, I think that's one of the deepest mental models that exists. And I think what you will hear from a lot of the ecosystem

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is, well, the pros of group homes is that they're keeping young people off the street and they're keeping them out of prison and they're keeping them from being exploited. And that's a great benefit. And of course, if the alternative is those things, that's a great benefit. But might there not be other alternatives that we could think of that might put young people in families?

TOM OATES [00:13:03]: Just that, just that, that mental place where somebody is - you're here because there's no other place for you. We have no, there's no other place for you to go. That, that definitely, that sends a message.

SIXTO CANCEL [00:13:21]: And what's also interesting is that when we've talked to leadership, right, a state child welfare director, is that some of the things that come up for them is then, well, where do we place our young people who have exhibited strong untreated trauma symptoms? And that might be expressed through suicide ideation or through intense sexual behaviors and so forth. One of the things that I'm just encouraged around is that we're actually seeing people innovate. So, Uplift Family Services in the Bay Area of California has a program where they have very well trained full-time foster parents that have paid staff were the home every single day. And these are young people who traditionally would be in congregate care settings, right? And instead they've been able to serve a portion of young people in the actual home with a system where there is a stabilization unit, right, for when things do hit the fan where no young person spends more than 24 hours in that facility. There is paid staff that's showing up every day and helping that young person heal.

[00:14:27]: And so for me, I think the other big mental model that we have to begin to address is that healing is possible outside of a facility, for a lot of the things that we're sending our young people to a facility for. And what's so important about this conversation is that we understand the nuance that Think of Us is a saying, which is we want to eliminate the unnecessary use of group homes and institutional placements. So, no diagnosis - I definitely feel strongly that a young person shouldn't be there. And then the second piece here is that I think sometimes advocates will say, hey, we need to shut this down today. But I understand that there is a complexity that we need to be able to launch the initiatives that support the states to be able to have enough licensed homes to build a practice around engaging the young people and identifying placements for them. And then the reduction and then the elimination of those groups, right?

[00:15:24]: And so I think there is a lot of nervous energy in the field right now because people are thinking that they're going to wake up one day and there's like new legislation and it's eliminating. And what we've seen in the past - because history rhymes, right - that when we did that to folks who had different cognitive, mental abilities, that we actually have pushed those folks into the streets. And so, we're not, we're not of the position of tomorrow, let's wake up and have no child in a group home without the proper infrastructure and support to ensure that we're not doing more harm by going ahead and having abrupt system behavior.

TOM OATES [00:16:04]: I'm going to want to pull on that a little bit later to talk about. So, what did the alternatives look like? Right? So, I want to put a, put a pin in that. But -

SARAH FATHALLAH [00:16:14]: I like to piggyback on something that Sixto was saying. I think one of the underlying themes that we're seeing is that when you have young people and you see them experiencing things like untreated trauma, behavioral issues, maybe special education needs, et cetera, things that are perceived as problems by the system, what the system does is they want to disappear the problems by disappearing the people experiencing them and sending them to these institutions. By

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sending them in these institutions, they don't have to deal with the problem, they can check off a box from a list and say, they're being dealt with by placing them in a psychiatric institution, by placing them in a group home, et cetera, et cetera. And really what we're trying to say is that this ignores the larger picture of the fact that these problems are only compounding and getting worse, especially later in the life of those young people as they leave care.

[00:17:15]: And they're left with a completely broken down social network and system that they can rely on with worse outcomes when it comes to pretty much everything across the board, whether that's education, whether that's housing, whether that's interaction with the criminal justice system, etcetera, etcetera. So, it's almost as if by disappearing these people into these institutions we're placing a Band-Aid on the issues at hand as opposed to really solving the core and the root causes of what those problems manifest as.

TOM OATES [00:17:52]: Well, almost adding to it, as well. So, not even the Band-Aid but, you know, letting it, letting the infection grow and that's not the right term to use, but when something goes untreated, but then you add trauma to it - you can only see that those problems are going to get worse and get untreated. There's just, like you mentioned, it's been hidden or it's been, a box has been checked.

SARAH FATHALLAH [00:18:19]: That absolutely right.

TOM OATES [00:18:20]: Yeah. So those who, when folks were listening to the beginning of this, they heard Sarah Sullivan read a poem written by a former youth in care. And Sarah, you used the term cultural probe in terms of what folks would find from the, from the report, from the Away From Home report about sharing the emotion, sharing the trauma through art, through pictures, through poetry. Where did the idea come from of having these, you share their experiences in such a way along with their stories, as well. It's something unique within this report because it moves really away from clinical and becomes much more of somebody truly sharing.

SARAH FATHALLAH [00:19:10]: Yeah, thank you for highlighting that we are not, we did not invent cultural probes. They are a, a method that exists especially in the realm of participatory research and design. And is one of the tools that we have in our toolbelt as researchers, though it is not used as frequently. I think going into this project, we had a few parameters that we were taking into account, right. Like we knew that this research was tackling a highly sensitive topic and might require participants to recall what could be very painful memories, right. So, there were three things we wanted to do. The first one is we wanted to have a way for participants to share things that may be hard to remember in a sequential, linear manner. And instead focus on sensory fragments, which is how traumatic events are encoded in the brain view, if you know about how trauma affects memory. The second thing is that we wanted to have a way for participants to express things that may be hard to describe verbally and in a conversation, right, but that they could potentially express through visual, written or spoken forms.

[00:20:32]: And then we also wanted to have a way for participants to feel less discomfort by having to sustain a live conversation with a researcher and sort of give them social permission to take the time to think about the answers and convey them in an asynchronous way. And so, cultural probes are perfect for that. They are formulated as evocative prompts that elicit subjective and fragmentary thoughts that are expressed through created, creative forums and in an asynchronous manner without the need to have a researcher physically present.

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TOM OATES [00:21:07]: I can only imagine that when you approached youth about sharing this particular way, it was different than any other time they've been asked to share their experience. How did you approach this idea with, with these, with these former youth - although still, still young - about A, participating in and B, participating in a manner like this of, of really displaying beyond kind of a spoken word.

SARAH FATHALLAH [00:21:39]: Yeah, I think we approached it in the same way that we word in inviting people to come into a conversation or an interview. We didn't necessarily use the term cultural probes because that's not, you know, that's a, that's a industry term that people may not be familiar with. We called them creative exercises. And then we, we gave out the prompts. We were pretty upfront with what they would be to do. And so, when they expressed interest in participating, they knew that those were the prompts that they would be responding to, right. And so, we, we, in our screener, which is another industry term where basically we have a form or a way to invite interest from people to participate in research and then sort of screen to which participants would fit within our sampling criteria.

[00:22:35]: We had language around these are the five exercises, creative exercises that we're asking you to participate in. We named those exercises and I can, I can describe what those prompts were. And then we invited them to show responses to as little as one and as many as five. So, there was no restrictions as to, you know, you have to, you are required to answer these in particular or not. So, they could navigate their own comfort with either none of the exercises, so they didn't have to participate. But if they wanted to, they could just be comfortable with one or two or more of those exercises. And so, the prompts were very broad and open-ended. There was some direction so that we could have some homogenous, way to look at the responses, but they were pretty broad in that they could invite a variety of answers. The first one was, we called it Keepsake. So, the prompt was, is there an object that you have currently in your possession that reminds you of your time in foster care. And if so, can you send us a picture of it?

[00:23:46]: The second one, the one that prompted the poem that you heard earlier - if you were invited to an open mic performance and asked to say a poem, spoken word, rap, or short song about that time in your life, what would it say? The third one was called people in your life, where we asked young people to remember when they were in congregate care and make a list of all the people in their life at that time. The fourth was museum exhibit. If a museum wanted to create an exhibit to show other people what life in institutional placements look like, what photograph or a piece of art you would contribute to that exhibit. And the last one was, in an ideal world, imagine what it would be like to be with a family if you could draw what that world looks like, what would it include?

TOM OATES [00:24:32]: The aspect of control. Controlling - although it's quote, unquote your story - the concept of controlling how you express it, controlling what matters to you, what you pick from it, I think is really, it's different and it's also so engaging. And so, we'll make sure that both on this episode's webpage that we have links to the Away From Home report. And I encourage folks to go in and just check it out. And you don't, you don't even need to go from start to finish. Just find any place in the middle and you'll be, you'll be captivated by, by the way the emotion - and I'll say this - the way the emotion transfers from the page to you. And you get a really deep dive into a particular experience for some folks or an overarching feeling. And so, I think that, you know, Sixto, this is a little different, how, I guess many youth are asked to share their story of lived experience. You know, get up, here's a microphone. Tell us your story and thank you very much. This is a, clearly a different way for folks.

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SIXTO CANCEL [00:25:46]: Yeah. And I'll have to say when this activity was first proposed, I had doubts. I was like, I don't know about this. How about we replace this one? And I think that's actually part of the problem with those of us who've been in child welfare for so long is that there is evidence of other research methods and tools outside of child welfare that are used that are much more empowering, that center voices of those who are impacted by a problem in a very different way. And, it's a constant exercise for us to be like, Hey, let's get out the way, let this happen. I was shocked when in four days we had 56 people respond. Four days with just a couple posts. It wasn't like we did a massive energy kind of, of recruitment around this. And so, to have people with lived experience just respond so much to it and to give such deep insight, it really inspired me. And, you know I've taken some of these activities and done them at a conference right before the pandemic. There was 200 young people who were in California and replicated even something like the hopes and dreams activity that, it's not in this particular study. But it truly does allow you to see the trends among our young people are thinking and how their experiences in the system are shifting some of those mental models and the thoughts that they have about life.

SARAH SULLIVAN [00:27:10]: And I'll just add on and say, you know, I totally agree, Sixto. And I think, I think child welfare and the whole ecosystem is catching on if it hasn't already, that incorporating voices of lived experience is very important. But to your point, Sixto, I think we can get stuck in similar kinds of ways of engagement when really there are so many different ways that we could be engaging. Engaging foster youth and people with lived experience. And this cultural probe activity that we've talked about is just one of the ways that we did that in Away From Home. And we really tried to be as creative as we could of thinking about ways that we could center lived experience in this project. And so, we're not here to say that cultural probes is the only way to do it. Or every project should have that. But really say to be as creative as you can with how we can incorporate lived, experienced and projects. Because the problems and challenges of child welfare are very complicated and we're only going to make any real progress if we have that at the table.

[00:28:13]: And I'll just share a couple of other ones that we did in this project that I also think were critical to getting us where we got. And one was that of our research team of seven teammates, three of the seven had personal lived experience in foster care. And of those three, two of them had personal lived experience in institutional placements. So, two of the seven had lived experience in institutional placements in foster care. And one of our teammates in multiple kinds of institutions, even beyond foster care. And I will say that that decision was absolutely critical to the success of the project and to the conclusions of the project. And they were very, I mentioned earlier that there were moments that were really surprising in the research process, which is a good thing. But there are moments that were very surprising and our ability to kind of get at the truth was very much because of the kind of team that we had put together. And there were moments where one of our teammates with lived experience, Bobbi Taylor, added some critical insights that I just don't think we would have gotten had we not had her and that element of perspective on the team.

[00:29:22]: And then, and then another one we did as this project ultimately went through a peer review process and it went through a traditional more academic peer review. And the three of us on this call got to thinking like, okay, well, if we're going to do the traditional academic peer review, what's a creative thing we could do, what's a creative thing that we could do to center lived experience in a peer review? And ultimately, we created a lived expert review board with five people who have, are professionally working in child welfare in one way or another, but also have lived experience in foster

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care. And we had them do a peer review of the paper. And so, and that also produced insights that I just don't think we would have gotten had we not done that. And so, I just say that to mean, I mean, really, the sky's the limit on how creative we want to get at finding methods that are bringing out voices in a new way. And I think we're proud of what we did, but we are already thinking about what would we do different in a future study and how would we build on that. So, we're by no means done with our thinking on this.

SARAH FATHALLAH [00:20:26]: And it'll also say that it's, so, having a variety of ways to invite those stories isn't just about getting a variety of stories. It's also a, an equity accessibility and inclusion issue. Like, we have to think that if we're only, if there's only one format, only one way, an avenue that we're inviting people to share their stories, whether that's, you know, speaking, or in an advocacy manner, who else are we excluding? Because this method or this avenue is not is not working for them. We have to think that, you know, foster youth is not a monolith as a group. There are folks who may have a variety of different accessibility needs. Folks who may be neuro divergent, folks who may have different attention spans. And just having like the one way to engage in storytelling and sharing your story excludes all kinds of people who may not feel safe or may not find those spaces generous for them. So, it's also really an equity and an access issue, as well.

TOM OATES [00:31:31]: Well you've, the report itself and the way you've developed it, the way it was reviewed, moves us toward really - and Sixto even talked about it a few minutes ago - of like shifting of how you incorporate folks, right? And what we may have been used to versus what's possible and what's more beneficial. And so, the report actually talks about that, about incorporating youth in decisions and living placements. And of course, if anybody follows some of the work of Think of Us, they'll, they'll notice that that's an ongoing theme in not just this report, but many. But when you start talking about incorporating youth, the phrase, you know, having a seat at the table comes to mind, but it doesn't necessarily talk about a seat at the table while it's being built and while it's being set, and while everything is going on. A lot of times it means a check-the-box exercise in the process of step A, B, C, and D. And then we put it in front of somebody with lived experience, and then we moved on. But it's not really talking about truly development. So, when we talk about incorporating youth in decisions on living and placements and policy developments, for example - what does this really look like to you in how it's different from maybe how jurisdictions are acting today?

SIXTO CANCEL [00:32:55]: The first thing that comes to mind is the word proximity. And it's not a destination. It is, to me, like a status. And so, you may have a lived experience with some type of trauma, but it's the nuance in your, in your experience and your continuance of remembering that that makes you proximate. And so, when I think about proximity, I think, I look at systems and I think strictly it's not about having a seat at the table. It's about that at every step of the process that we are truly centering lived experience and what are they about to experience, what are they about to endure and how did they have a voice? How do you know it's true? Not because of your own assumptions, but because you actually have done the work. Even as a person with lived experience, my experiences are unique. And about ten years ago when Brian Samuel was in the federal government, I had this very interesting conversation, I was like 19 at the time.

[00:33:55]: And he's like, Sixto. You have a unique set of experiences. Not, most foster youth come into care and they have about half of them go back home. And so, that was such a profound moment for me because what I realized is that even as, like having the lived experience of one person at the table is one person, but we have to understand the collective experience. And so, that's why qualitative research is so important to be able to bring the different aspects to the table because you will skew decisions by

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only either tailoring to one. So, I do believe that the damage that's done when you have no lived experience, that the damage that is done when you tokenize one set of experiences is the same. And so, how might we actually be able to make better decisions by incorporating more perspectives? And so, I'll say that centering lived experience is critical and contexts is also critical. So, the context of the experience of a frontline worker, of the fiscal person, of the child welfare director - those are important too. And I think sometimes the conversation gets pitted against each other where you're like, well is it youth voice versus staff voice or is it youth voice versus the policy folks, or x, y, z. And what we're actually saying is that when you center the lived experience of the person who has been impacted by the problem - they can't take their hat off at the end of the day - and you put that in context with all the different players around, that is going to get you closer to a real tangible solution.

SARAH SULLIVAN [00:35:29]: And I'll just share, you know, in this work, I think Sixto is speaking at the kind of macro level of how the system works. And I, and I think we make a lot of assumptions that things that we just assume are happening, are happening. And I'll give you an example which is, we asked every person that we spoke to in an interview, you know, we had an interview script that we used and everyone was asked this question. While you were living in an institutional placement, was there someone else in your life you wanted to be living with? And everybody except for two, said yes. And we said, okay, tell us about that person. And they would tell us about that person. And they would unpack the reasons why they weren't able to live there. And in some cases, it's they wanted to live with mom and courts had ruled you can't live with mom. And you might expect that one. But in other cases, it was I went to live with my aunt. But my aunt is afraid to be connected with the system because she has her own kids and she doesn't want to come under, she doesn't want to be anywhere near the system.

[00:36:41]: And sometimes it's, you know, it's like Sixto saying it was different every time, but we had a story of a bio and an uncle was going to be the placement option. And in the process of that happening, the aunt and uncle get divorced. But the uncle says it's all good, you can still come live with me. And, the system ruled the teenager girl couldn't live with the uncle. And so, we decided it was better to put her in an institutional placement. Another one was we wouldn't send, we wouldn't send the young person to a family member out-of-state because it was out-of-state. But we sent them to an institution that was out-of-state. Or another one was someone was living with a foster care parent and they were having a good, they'd had a good setup for several years, but the foster care parents has their own mother. So, the foster grandmother moves into the home - she was in her 80s - and the woman in her 80s, in her 30s, 50 years ago, had a criminal record that had never been expunged. She actually wasn't convicted of, but had never been expunged, they never, you know, it was 50 years ago. We took the young person out of that foster care placement. We put her in an institution. And even two weeks later, when that grandmother finally got the record cleared, we wouldn't allow her to go back. And that teenager never lived with a family again until she was 18.

[00:38:01]: So we talked to story, after story, after story of young people who had really good places - I'm just saying, really good reasons that they wanted to live where they wanted to live - and we didn't always have great reasons for why we weren't doing that. You know? And so, I think I'm bringing it back to the super micro level when kind of Sixto blew us out to the macro for a minute to say, I think we have a lot of assumptions that we're doing things like asking youth where they want to live and then trying to make that possible. But I think, unfortunately, too much of the time we're not doing even that simple behavior of like, hey, where do you want to live and how can we try to unblock some of the red tape to make it possible? And that's part of what it looks like to have a seat at the table and having young people be a part of the decision is like actually bringing them in as a part of the process, even on this very case-by-case level.

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TOM OATES [00:38:59]: Does that also point to a mindset approach to what's possible? Just even saying, you know, what's possible. You brought up the grandmother and somebody who had a criminal record 50 years ago. But somewhere along the line, the phrase criminal record came in and that instantly dropped the red flag and no, never, not possible. But did anyone take a further step and go wait a minute. What does this mean? How long ago was it? Is it that big of a deal? What's the most important thing? And that's where it's who are you serving? Are you serving a system or are you serving a person? And what is it about the system that does not incorporate the person? It, it, it lends to a mental shift beyond institutional care, but what are the decisions that are leading up to that? What is the change that needs to happen then? Because even if somebody does get asked, where would they want to live, how do we break down the other barriers that say, well, here's all the reasons why we can't. And no one, apparently - and this is apparently - is trying to figure out, well, what can you do and what matters. You know, it's, it's, it's the decisions aren't being made by individuals. It's decisions sound like they're being made by the system. And if you cross a line or if you don't check a box, then something is sealed off.

SARAH SULLIVAN [00:40:26]: I'll share one reflection and then, Sixto, maybe you want to build on it is what you just said, Tom, is exactly what we found from young people in the study. Ultimately Away From Home, based on the body of evidence - and, and, and research from outside of this project - but based on the body of evidence of this project, as you know, Away From Home, ultimately calls for the end of the unnecessary use of institutional placements and foster care. And you will see that as the first recommendation when you look at the report. That said, the remaining recommendations have almost nothing to do with institutional placements in the sense that we believe we got to this place because of problems that happened upstream in child welfare. We want to create a world where we don't have institutional placements, we're going to have to go back upstream and solve some of those upstream problems. So, for example, as we know, many young people end up in foster care, unfortunately not for issues of abuse or neglect - which is what the child welfare system really aims to exist for - but, really true reasons of poverty, racism, where it's, you know, not having childcare. It's things like this. And, and we could actually just solving those problems in a different way rather than removing children into child welfare.

[00:41:41]: So, obviously prevention is a huge piece of it and we'd have, we'd cut down the pie by a lot, you know, the problem, by a lot if we just solved the true prevention problem rather than getting young people in who never really needed to be there. There's that. Then of course, there's the cases when there is true abuse or neglect, and that is what the system is intended to serve, well then we feel like the best - and not just us, obviously lots of other literature too - but we feel like the best first placement is someone the young person already knows, which is defined, loosely call kinship. But someone you already know whether it's someone in your family or coach, or it's Pastor, it's friend or it's best friend's family, or whenever. Someone that you already know. And there's a whole lot of infrastructure that we can do to help shore that up - work on licensing stuff, broadening the legal definition of kin - but making kin a lot more robust of an option. And then what we feel right now and what the report argues is that foster family placements, which is to say when we put you with a stranger, that that really should be the last resort of child welfare. That actually extracting you from your community, moving you with someone you don't know, those are really, those should really be the last resort.

[00:42:57]: And if we go to that last resort, then we can do a lot to make that placement as good as possible. For example, recruiting foster families who are in the same neighborhoods and in the same school districts and speak the same language and have the same religion or, or placements that are affirming of all aspects of youth's identities. That we recruit families that have that kind of profile. And

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so, when we place the foster parents, that's really kind of the last, that's a last resort placement. So, that's kind of how we're thinking about it, is that you swim upstream and solve some of the upstream problems that got us here to begin with.

TOM OATES [00:43:34]: It's a theme that resonates throughout so many of these conversations that I'm able to have, but it's a, it's an idea of prevention versus again - and Sarah had brought it up before - of hiding the problem or trying to find that band-aid. You know, it's let's move back and you used a term I'm hearing more and more - upstream.

SIXTO CANCEL [00:43:56]: And one of the things I'll point out is that I just want to also clarify for the audience that we don't believe there's like an evil person who's sitting behind an office desk saying, we're going to make this decision about this case. We actually believe that the architect of the current system is one that sets the condition that forces the people that work in it to only have but a few options. You know, if there were more options for young people to heal beyond medication and talk therapy and that child welfare would reimburse some of these other options, right, that are starting to generate evidence around, then workers would select that box, right? If we had more options and more time and support to explore family and to be able to have the right tools, to be able to go ahead and go on that journey, that more workers would be able to do it, do that. So, the structured condition, the literal architect of our current system, is one in which it almost forces decisions to be put in these type of pipelines.

[00:44:56]: And that has reinforced the mental model. It's fostered the current way of thinking and then reinforces it with the current rules that keep this current problem in place. So, now we have to do two type of bodies of work. We have to re-architect so that the system has more options and allows for this to happen in a different way. And we have to go ahead and change the way people now think about families because there's almost this subconscious thought of, well, there's a reason why we shouldn't place with kin. And we've heard that from paid people, paid professionals that work in the system, right? And so, some places are now starting to change up the way that they make it easier for kin to get licensed, for example, or to be able to get approved to be able to take in a relative. And like that's a direction that we want to go in. We want to start the, looking at the architecture that's currently in place for kin, and how might we optimize it currently so that we have more kinship families?

TOM OATES [00:45:53]: Before we wrap up, I want to kind of, as much as we're talking about the altering the system, right, to work more upstream, I don't want to wrap this up without something that we talked about a little earlier, and so, I want to get back to it - about the overarching alternatives to institutions. Now clearly, Sixto, as you mentioned, there's not going to be let's sign the legislation today and tomorrow there will be no more institutions and that's it. What do you guys see - after performing the research and hearing from everyone - what do you see as an alternative to institution?

SIXTO CANCEL [00:46:30]: I think the alternative is, part of the alternative is family, right? So, when there's an unnecessary use because there's no diagnosis, this is literally just a problem of placement, then we have to go ahead and the alternative is family. And what we're seeing is that certain initiatives like from Marina Martin at New America - what she's been able to do is, in less than 18 months, help streamline the whole licensing process in certain states like Washington State and New Mexico. And in New Mexico, they've jumped from about 4% placements with kin to almost a little over 50%, right, in the last year and a half. So, what we're seeing that there is tangible, solvable things that can be done to increase the number of licensed homes, places that have implemented software that now have digitized

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that process, have increased their licensed homes in over 91 jurisdictions of an average of 80%, 80% more. So, this problem of not having enough homes, it is possible to begin to solve that problem.

[00:47:31]: The second piece I would say here is that we need to dig into the healing. That there are more ways that are, then to help young people heal than a facility. And so, how might we be able to incorporate more of those opportunities so that jurisdictions then are able to use those, those things just like Uplift Family Services and being able to support young people. But I also want to give space to Sarah and Sarah to give their thoughts here, too.

TOM OATES [00:48:00]: What do you see as an alternative to institutions?

SARAH SULLIVAN [00:48:03]: You know, I think in short, the, what we found from this project is that the replacement to institutions that young people are asking for and that we're hearing are family. And what family looks like can take different forms, obviously for different young people, in many cases it can be prevention where entry into the system can be prevented and young people can remain with the family they were living with before. In some places it's gonna be kinship, in some places this is gonna be foster family placements that are more supportive than they are today. But I think families are the true, the true alternative to institutionalization. And I think one thing we have to think about is, is to question the assumption that institutions are actually healing. I think there's a lot to say about the fact that human connection and being in relationship with people who are not paid staff, but will be there for the long haul can also and is deeply healing. And I think we need to have that front and center as part of this conversation.

TOM OATES [00:49:05]: Sarah Sullivan, Sarah Fathallah, Sixto Cancel - thank you guys so much. Again, the Away From Home report, we'll be linking that out on this episode's webpage. I encourage folks to, to, to take a deep dive into that and not only think about the expressions from those former youth have, but also the bigger picture that you just heard when we talk about the, the lens of prevention that needs to be approached and to incorporating family, as Sarah just mentioned. Guys, thank you so much not only for your work on this report, but your time that you spent with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

SIXTO CANCEL [00:49:45]: Tom, I just want to say thank you so much for having us on. It's a pleasure to talk about these very important issues and we know they're complicated, they're nuanced, but we're here to have the tough conversations with folks.

SARAH SULLIVAN [00:49:56]: Thank you so much.

SARAH FATHALLAH [00:49:57]: Yes. Thank you so much for having us, this was great.

TOM OATES [00:50:02]: Now, as we mentioned during our conversation, we'll have links to the Away From Home report on this episode's web page. Just head on over to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts. We'll also share a recent guest essay Sixto Cancel wrote for the New York Times and other resources from Think of Us. Of course, there are ample resources and tools on Child Welfare Information Gateway regarding institutional care, the shifts toward involving youth in their case plans and paths toward Independent Living. And you can find them all at childwelfare.gov. And we'll have links available on this episode's webpage to those sections. Now, if you are seeking help for your work supporting youth in care, you can reach out to our information support services team at

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info@childwelfare.gov. Our team is there to help you with your search and get you the information you need or resources that you can provide youth or families.

[00:50:59]: Hey, if you like what you're hearing, well, thank you. Go ahead and subscribe to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcasts. You can get new episodes each month delivered right to your device. And we are available on Apple podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud. As always, my thanks to you for being a part of this ongoing journey to improve the lives of children, youth, and families. And thanks to Sixto Cancel, Sarah Sullivan and Sarah Fathallah from Think of Us for their time, energy, and willingness to join us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates, have a great day.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:51:41]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.