



The **Blast** NEWSLETTER

*Back to School
Edition 2025*

Official Newsletter of the
Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board

YAB
PA
YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

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YAB Southeastern Regional Event August 18, 2025



On August 18th, the Southeastern Youth Advisory Board members gathered at the Atlantic Coast Athletic Club (ACAC) outdoor pool in West Chester, PA for a fun and relaxing summer event.

Youth and staff from Chester, Philadelphia, Bucks County, and our Youth Ambassador, Qasim Abrams came together for an afternoon filled with laughter and connection. Everyone enjoyed their time in the pool, racing down the two slides, and even played a few rounds of Marco Polo. Pizza was delivered poolside, giving everyone a chance to relax, eat, and share stories about their summer experiences.

Conversations flowed about the upcoming transition into college, new school year plans, and the excitement of what's ahead. This event was a wonderful way to bring our Southeastern youth together before the semester begins, strengthening friendships and building community across counties.



A Banner Finds Its Home in Bucks County

Elyse Coldren-Baker



This year's retreat brought a renewed energy and spirit of innovation as more youth and staff came together under the inspiring theme: **Reaching for the S.T.A.R.S.** With such a powerful theme in hand, we wanted to create a banner that reflected not only our shared vision, but also the unique hopes and dreams of each individual youth who attended.

Rather than creating a traditional single-canvas banner, we got creative and embraced a new approach — a polyptych, or collage of canvases, allowing each young person to contribute their own personalized interpretation of the theme. The group quickly latched onto an exciting idea: arranging the individual canvases to form a giant star, symbolizing unity and direction. Before picking up paintbrushes, the youth and staff engaged in a dynamic brainstorming session to reflect on what **Reaching for the S.T.A.R.S.** meant to them collectively. It was agreed that each canvas would feature the outline of the youth's hands reaching toward the center — a shared galaxy of stars. This would visually and symbolically connect their individual journeys, all aiming toward a common light.

As the creative process unfolded, each canvas became a deeply personal expression and a dedicated youth-staff duo worked collaboratively on the central canvas, carefully crafting a mesmerizing galaxy that tied the entire piece together.

Now proudly displayed in Bucks County's Tabor, the completed banner is more than just artwork. It is a powerful symbol of collaboration, creativity, and the collective dreams of a community reaching to the STARS — together.

Elder Youth Retreat 2025

From July 28 – August 1, 89 youth from 28 counties across Pennsylvania came together at the University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown for an unforgettable week of connection, growth, and fun. Ranging ages 16 to 20, participants spent their days making friends, learning new skills, and creating memories that will last long after the retreat ended.

Every evening, the group gathered with staff for check-in time to talk about what they enjoyed most, reflect on how they were feeling mentally and physically, and share if they needed any extra support. These nightly moments became an important part of the retreat, helping everyone feel heard, supported, and connected.

The week kicked off on Monday with hands-on activities including Pardon My Garden, Write Your Heart Out, and Photography, just to name a few. Youth-led peer group sessions gave participants the chance to share ideas, laugh together, and build strong friendships from the very start. That night, the energy carried into the recreation center, where youth could cool off in the pool, shoot hoops on the basketball court, or join a lively game of dodgeball.

On Tuesday, participants learned more about the PA Youth Advisory Board (YAB) in an engaging and informative presentation. The session broke down how YAB works, its mission, and the different ways youth can take on leadership roles and have their voices heard in shaping the system.

Wednesday was a day for deepening connections. Friendships that started on day one grew stronger as the youth spent more time together. The highlight of the day was the Older Youth Permanency Panel, where two young people shared their personal journeys to finding permanency and what it truly meant in their lives. Their honesty and courage left a lasting impact on the audience. This was followed by Jerry Dickinson (the Dean of the University of Pittsburgh Law School) sharing his own powerful story of growing up in foster care, showing youth firsthand that their past does not limit their future.

Thursday brought a wave of inspiration. EJ Carrion, an Afro-Latino entrepreneur and nationally recognized speaker, took the stage to share his story of resilience, mentorship, and creating opportunities for others. He spoke about breaking barriers, believing in yourself, and turning



challenges into motivation. After a wonderful picnic that was held shortly after our guest speaker, everyone gathered for the Talent Show, a night filled with incredible performances including clarinet solos, original poetry, and beautiful singing. The room was electric with cheers and applause, as youth celebrated one another's talents and bravery.

By Friday, the retreat was coming to an end, but the connections, memories, and lessons would stick with everyone for a while. The theme, "Reach for the S.T.A.R.S. Self-Control, Trustworthiness, Accountability, Respect, and Success," was more than just a catchphrase. Every day, the youth embodied these values, showing themselves and one another that no dream is too big and no goal is out of reach.

A banner with a dark purple background featuring several bright, glowing spotlights. The text "Spotlight on Excellence:" is written in a large, white, cursive font, and "Retreat Award Recipients" is written below it in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

Spotlight on Excellence:

Retreat Award Recipients

Independent Living Worker of the Year: Cece Knox

The **Independent Living (IL) Worker of the Year Award** is a newly developed opportunity for youth to recognize independent living staff in Pennsylvania who have had a positive impact on their lives.

This award allows any youth or alumni of the child welfare system—ages 14–23 who currently receive independent living or aftercare services through a County Children and Youth agency or a private provider in Pennsylvania—to nominate a staff member who has gone above and beyond in their role.

This year marks the **first time** the award is being presented, led by the **Older Youth Retreat Steering Committee**.

The winner of this year's award, **Cece Knox**, was described by youth as:

- Compassionate
- Consistent
- Positive
- Present
- Kind
- A good listener
- Professional
- Genuine
- Caring

These qualities together make up the recipe for an outstanding Independent Living Worker—and Cece embodies them all.



Older Youth Services Agency of the Year: Christian Home of Johnstown

The **Older Youth Services Agency of the Year Award** recognizes an agency in Pennsylvania that is exceptional in its support and positively impacts the lives of older youth and alumni.

Any youth or alumni of the child welfare system—ages 14–23 who currently receive services through a County Children and Youth agency or a private provider—can nominate an agency that has made a difference in their life.

The **Older Youth Retreat Steering Committee** developed this award to shine a spotlight on agencies across the state that provide exceptional service, dedication, and care for older youth and alumni. Youth were invited to submit nominations explaining why they felt an agency deserved this recognition.

This year, we are proud to announce that the **Christian Home of Johnstown** has been selected as the **2025 Older Youth Services Agency of the Year**.



Youth Voice Spotlight

We Rise: By Kandy Gomez

montgomery county | written 7/29/2025

say we're "damaged," say we're "hard,"
like growing up this way was ours to choose.
like being passed around in pieces
was something we could never lose.
they don't see the nights we cried alone,
the door slammed shut, the cold unknown.
the bruises hidden, the meals we missed,
the birthday gifts that don't exist.
they don't see how we learned to flinch
at every footstep, every pinch.
how some of us were barely fed,
and learned to dream on floors instead.
we've heard it all—
"you're just a case."
"you should be thankful for this place."
"you're lucky someone even cares."
but love was never truly there.
still...
we carry on with quiet grace,
with broken hearts we try to trace.
a way to feel, a way to trust,
to turn the ashes into dust.
we aren't the labels they assign,
not born to fail, not born malign.
we're fighters made in early years,

who've swallowed oceans full of tears.
we've seen too much, too young, too fast,
but trauma doesn't have to last.
because inside all that we've endured,
a softer strength has been secured.
we look at each other and we see—
not pity, not shame, but family.
we rise together, side by side,
with every scar, with every stride.
we rise for the ones still stuck in fear,
for every foster kid who's still not near
a safe bed, a warm hug, a steady hand—
we build that future, we make that stand.
we are not burdens, not mistakes.
we're love that never truly breaks.
we are the hope we didn't get,
the ones who rise, without regret.
and if the world won't make us room,
we'll build a garden out of gloom.
so future kids can live, not fight—
to sleep in peace and wake in light.
we're more than what they tried to make.
we bend, we burn, but never break.
together, loud and brave and true—
we rise.
we heal.
we make it through.



What is NYTD?

The **National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)** is a federal initiative designed to collect and track data on youth transitioning out of foster care in the United States. Established under the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, NYTD aims to improve outcomes for youth aging out of the foster care system.

NYTD collects data at various stages of a young person's life to assess their progress and identify areas where additional support may be needed. This information helps states and federal agencies shape policies, enhance services, and ensure that youth receive the necessary resources for a successful transition to adulthood.

Building the NYTD Council and Update

The NYTD Council for Youth is an exciting new initiative that empowers youth with lived experience in foster care to influence state-level policy decisions. The council provides a platform for youth to:

- Share their experiences and insights
- Discuss challenges and opportunities
- Help shape the future of youth services

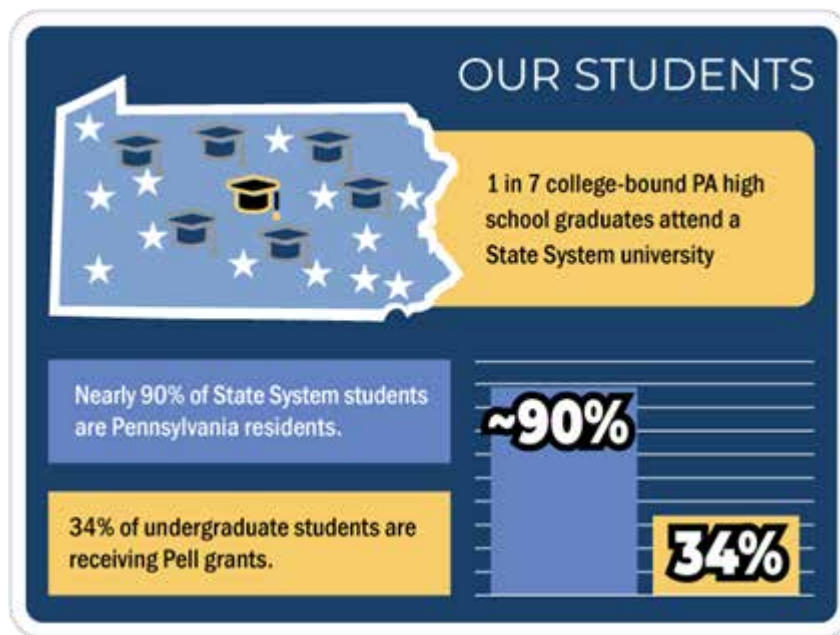
Beyond policy input, the council also focuses on leadership development, advocacy, and peer support—fostering a strong sense of community and purpose.

The first council meeting was held on **March 26** as a kickoff event. While there was great anticipation and enthusiasm to hear from youth, attendance was lower than expected—likely due to the timing coinciding with the end of the school year and other life demands.

To better accommodate interested youth and ensure broader participation, a follow-up meeting is planned. This future session will be scheduled with greater flexibility to support youth availability and help build a strong, engaged council. More information will be shared as the council develops and resources become available.

Our Students and The Opportunity Gap

PA students are often limited to in-state colleges, and for youth in care this barrier is even greater. Highlighting these challenges is important to show the gaps they face, but also to remind them of the resources, programs, and opportunities that can still support their success.



2025-2026 SAT Waivers



SAT WEEKEND

Fee Waiver Service

Student Brochure

 Student eligibility

 Benefits of the SAT fee waiver service

 Information on getting an SAT fee waiver and other resources

2025-26



As another year of school is approaching, many of our high school juniors and seniors are not only looking to achieve their high school diploma or GED certificate, but they may be considering their options regarding post-secondary education. The process of applying for college admission can be expensive. Costs may include SAT fees and institutional application fees. To reduce this financial barrier, the College Board provides SAT fee-waivers to various agencies to distribute to qualified, economically disadvantaged students who plan to take the SAT tests.

For more information visit:

<https://www.payab.pitt.edu/files/2025-2026SATSupervisorLetter.pdf>



Foster Care to College Outreach Initiative

PHEAA Foster Care to College Outreach Initiative

This newly updated website from the Pennsylvania Higher Educational Assistance Agency (PHEAA) includes valuable resources for students in foster care, caregivers, and professionals, including:

- Chafee Grant Information
- Tuition Waiver Program Information
- Contact Directories
- Program Directories
- Scholarship Information
- And more!

PHEAA Update

In mid-June, PHEAA began sending eligibility notices for the 2025-26 PA State Grant Program. Students are encouraged to view their eligibility determination through their Account Access profile. Please note that award amounts are tentative until the PA State Budget passes, at which point awards will be finalized.

PHEAA Helps Students & Families Plan Ahead for College With Free PA Forward Webinars

This summer, encourage your students and families to join PHEAA's free PA Forward webinars hosted by PHEAA's PA Forward team! July's webinars take a "Deep Dive into Covering the Gap" to help students and families better understand how to pay for college. Monthly webinars offer valuable tools to prepare for the next step in their education journey. Register now at pheaa.org/virtual.



Through FAFSA ID Verification: Tools + Training

The U.S. Department of Education has announced a new system for verifying students' identities when submitting the FAFSA, set to launch in fall 2025.

In the interim, more students will be selected for identity verification during the summer in order to receive financial aid. **This process is separate from unaccompanied homeless youth determinations, yet homeless youth may face additional challenges and barriers to obtaining documents needed for ID verification.**

Share this resource with students

After submitting the FAFSA, some students are selected for ID verification—a process used to confirm your identity and prevent fraud. This resource explains:

- What FAFSA ID verification is and why it happens
- How it's different from an unaccompanied homeless youth determination
- Steps students can take if they're selected for ID verification
- Where to find help obtaining a government-issued photo ID



I've Been Selected for Financial Aid ID Verification—What Do I Do?



Crisis Lines for LGBTQ+ Populations

Hotlines that do not call emergency services without permission

When members of the LGBTQ+ community seek crisis support, safety, consent, and affirmation are essential. This reference sheet is a curated guide to crisis hotlines that do not contact emergency services without the caller's consent, providing a more respectful and empowering support experience. This resource highlights national crisis lines that prioritize confidentiality, cultural competence, and peer support for LGBTQ+, BIPOC, neurodivergent, and other marginalized individuals. It includes information on hours of availability, the focus of each line, and the communities they serve. [Download here and share with those who could benefit from it.](#)

Trauma Tip Sheet

August 2025 Trauma Tip Sheet

OCYF Trauma Team



Highlights from the OCYF Trauma Toolbox

The OCYF Trauma Team is excited to highlight some of the information available in the Trauma Toolbox, released by our team in June 2025. The first topic we will highlight is **Trauma-informed supervision**. As we understand more fully the impact of secondary traumatic stress (STS), quality supervision becomes crucial for supporting staff at risk of STS. The STS Supervisory Competencies, created by the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#), can serve as a benchmark for effective STS supervision and guide organizations to address gaps in those competencies. [Click to explore the full document: *Using the Secondary Traumatic Stress Core Competencies in Trauma-Informed Supervision PDF*](#)



Secondary Traumatic Stress Core Competencies for Supervisors

- ☼ Knowledge of the signs, symptoms, and risk factors of STS and its impact on employees.
- ☼ Know agency support options and how to refer employees for help.
- ☼ Knowledge and capacity to self-assess, monitor, and address the supervisor's own STS.
- ☼ Encourage safe sharing of trauma-related feelings.
- ☼ Skills to assist the employee in emotional re-regulation after difficult encounters.
- ☼ Knowledge of basic Psychological First Aid (PFA) or other supportive approaches to assist staff after an emergency or crisis event.
- ☼ Ability to both model and coach supervisees in using a trauma lens.
- ☼ Knowledge of resiliency factors and the ability to structure resilience-building into individual and group supervisory activities.
- ☼ Recognize normal changes vs. distortions from trauma exposure.
- ☼ Use appropriate self-disclosure to help supervisees understand trauma's impact.



The OCYF Trauma Informed Care Webpage offers tools and access to previously released Trauma Tip Sheets and Newsletters as well as the Trauma Toolbox at [OCYF Trauma-Informed Care \(TIC\) | Department of Human Services | Commonwealth of Pennsylvania](#)

Resources

Mental Health Support

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

Call: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

National Crisis Text Hotline

Text "HOME" to 741741

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline Visit:

988lifeline.org

Available 24/7/365.

Call, chat, or text.

ASL Videophone available for

Deaf/Hard of Hearing.

Housing & Safety

Homeless National Hotline

Call: 1-800-786-2929

National Youth & Teen Runaway Hotline

Call: 1-800-Runaway

National Domestic Violence Support Hotline

Call: 1-800-799-SAFE

Visit: www.thehotline.org

Health & Wellness

National STD Hotline

Call: 1-800-227-8922

Legal Support

Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network Call:

1-800-322-7572

Child Protection

National Child Abuse Hotline

Call: 1-800-422-4453

LGBTQ+ Support

988 LGBTQ+ Line

Dial 988, Press 3

Text "PRIDE" to 988

Talk with an LGBTQ+ trained crisis counselor, available 24/7 for individuals under 25.

Visit: 988lifeline.org/help-yourself/lgbtqi/

Call Blackline

Call or Text: 1-800-604-5841

24/7 support for Black, LGBTQ+, and Black Femme communities

Visit: callblackline.com

LGBT National Hotline

Call: 1-888-843-4564

Visit: lgbthotline.org

Hours: Mon-Fri: 1 PM - 9 PM PT /

4 PM - Midnight ET

Sat: 9 AM - 2 PM PT / Noon - 5 PM ET

Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity (MASGD)

Call: 717-QTM-INARA (717-864-6272)

Hours: Fri-Sat, 5 PM - 11 PM CT

Visit: themasgd.org/Inara-helpline

Youth Support

Q Chat Space

Chat with peers in live, facilitated chats (Ages 13-19).

Visit: qchatspace.org

The QTP Loveline

Call: 1-855-578-5683

24/7 on-demand service.

Visit: queertransproject.org

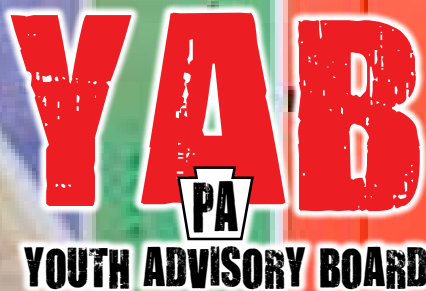
Upcoming Events

YAB Statewide Meetings:

- Thursday, September 18, 2025
- Thursday, November 20, 2025
- Thursday, January 22, 2026
- Thursday, March 19, 2026
- Thursday, May 21, 2026

YAB Leadership Summit 2026:

- Wednesday - Thursday, June 10-11, 2026



University of
Pittsburgh

School of
Social Work

Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center