

# MN Youth Leadership Council – Sibling Bill of Rights

Current and former foster youth who are members of the Minnesota Youth Leadership Council propose that MN adopt a Sibling Bill of Rights. MYLC leaders were inspired to develop this proposal during when they learned how youth leaders from other states have passed similar language with the goal of keeping sibling families intact. MN has Youth Leadership Councils in the cities of Bemidji, Crookston, Duluth, Mankato, Minneapolis, Rochester and Willmar.

## Background

Sibling relationships are empowering and critically important for siblings over the course of a lifetime. These relationships are bonds and most often are the longest meaningful connection in life. For young people entering foster care, being supported by their siblings can promote safety, well-being and a sense of security. Sibling separation can cause a vast amount of trauma that would likely interfere with future relationships that the youth try to build. For the welfare of children, where one sibling is removed from the home or all are removed from the home but in separate placements, their legal rights should be to remain connected at all given costs and should not be limited. ★

## Youth Leaders – Inspiration to create the Sibling Bill of Rights

*I chose to help create the sibling bill of rights to help any and all foster youth who have siblings. I personally don't have siblings but I know many youth who do. I have talked with them and some still don't even have contact with their siblings. They described their experiences as hard and rough. They felt as if they didn't have a purpose some days because they grew up with each other. They lose who they are and most of the time they never did anything wrong. Their siblings were all they had and they were stripped of them. – Youth Leader from Bemidji*

*What inspired me to help create the Sibling Bill of Rights was when I went to a national foster youth conference I learned that a lot of other states already have this bill in place. I feel that Minnesota lacks a lot of rights in regards to youth in the foster care system, these youth need to feel safe and aware that people are working to make this system better for them. I feel it is so important that these young kids who are sometimes even unaware of what is happening and why still have family that they can talk to. To be removed from your home and not be allowed to talk to anyone about what you're feeling the sadness the anger can be devastating. None of these situations are ideal but I feel it is crucial to have something in place that lets youth know that we do care. – Youth Leader from Willmar*

*Family connections are important and we need family connections. When you are snatched out of your home and you can't have contact with your parents, your siblings are all that you have. Most of the time you can't even talk to your siblings without supervision or someone else listening in. We should have the right to talk with our siblings without permission especially when we are feeling down, because they are the only people who understand. – Youth Leader from Minneapolis*

*Me, myself not knowing that I have two other siblings I was never even allowed to know, makes me sad. I can only imagine how hard it would be to be separated from siblings you'd know your whole life. I found out about my other siblings just 3 ½ years ago. Its easy to miss someone you have never met, but I believe it is really hard to miss someone you already know. I would like to be able to contact my siblings. – Youth Leader from Crookston*

*I decided to help with the sibling bill of rights because I have siblings. And a few of them were separated from me during the transition to foster care. This was hard to me, since I was used to seeing them all the time, and they were my idols for a while. I also want to bring to light the fact that my siblings are the only reason I'm alive today, because once I fell into a deep depression, they were the only people that were there for me, and I stuck around to help them through life. I chose the sibling connections because I want people to know how much of an impression siblings make on each other. – Youth Leader from Bemidji*

*I have a little sister that was 7yrs old at the time, an older brother that was over 18 so he didn't have to go with us. Me and my other 2 siblings were 15,16 & I was turning 17 later in May. While growing up, we were always in the same household so being separated was hard for all of us. While we were in care I only talked to my sister 4 times in 5 months may 2013- Nov 2013. then all of a sudden the foster home she was in phone was lost till January of 2014. Then our Cp worker got us supervised visits once a week. then April of 2015 it got cut off. then didn't see or speak to her till Nov of 2015. super supervised visits and more. then 5 times the foster home cancelled cause of stuff she had planned when our visits were court ordered. September of 2016 my sister got to go to my uncle's house and been there ever since. Sibling Connection is very important to me cause my siblings are my world and the way the system played their part wasn't right at all to siblings in care. So I'm extremely blessed to have the siblings bill of right moving forward. so future siblings will not have to go thru what us other youth went thru when it comes to sibling connections. – Youth Leader from Minneapolis*

### Siblings should have the right to:

- Be placed with each other when possible. Remain a family. Give adult siblings the chance to be a foster parent, adoptive parent, or gain custody over younger siblings to keep families together.
- Be placed in close proximity with each other, if they cannot be placed together, to facilitate frequent and meaningful contact including: phone, internet, social media, FaceTime, skype etc. Siblings will be provided with a phone number, email, and/or address and access to updated photos by email or mail.
- Be actively involved in each other's' lives if they choose. Share celebrations including: birthdays, holidays, graduations, school, extracurricular activities, cultural customs including speaking their native language, and other meaningful milestones.
- Be informed about changes in each other's placements including being notified of discharge from placements, new placements, as well as discharge from foster care. Siblings will be allowed to maintain contact with other siblings who remain in care. Every effort should be made to ensure contact between siblings in care and those who are not in care.
- Predictable and regular visits that shall not be withheld as a behavioral consequence. Unless verifiable safety concerns exist, siblings should not be kept from each other. Visits can be monitored, but should not be supervised unless there is a safety risk. Youth, caregivers, social workers, and parents are all responsible for ensuring that siblings have contact. All parties will coordinate dates and times, transportation, and other accommodations to ensure contact occurs. This should be outlined in their service plan. Due to the normalcy provision, the social worker does not need to give permission for visits or possible sleep overs, but foster parents should still communicate with and inform the social worker that these activities are occurring. The judge should also be updated on sibling connections at every hearing.
- Be included in permanency planning decisions relative to siblings. They should know what the expectations are for continued contact when a sibling is adopted or custody is transferred to a relative.

## Talking Points HF3626 – Foster Sibling Bill of Rights

- Minnesota is fortunate to have visionary and effective young leaders, who brought us today's proposal.
- HF3626 was developed by the MN Youth Leadership Councils from across the state, by youth leaders who are currently or formerly in foster care.
- This group of leaders went Washington, DC last spring, and returned inspired to develop this proposal focused on maintaining family – sibling connections.
- The bill seeks to assure close sibling connection throughout foster care placement. Specifically requiring that based on the best interest of the child, siblings are placed together in a foster home, and if not placed together then the relationship is supported through ongoing communication and visits, and that planning for the future is done with the importance of sibling relationships in mind.
- Language in this bill was modeled after work done in other states, drawing from data provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Child Welfare Project
- Today we have Sasha Martin from the YMCA and Vivianna Castillo-Robyal from Evergreen in Bemidji to share their perspectives on the bill before you.