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*Brisia Gutierrez* channels her lived experience as a former foster youth to inform policy and systems change as a youth leader on the DCFS Director's Advisory Council.

Recognizing that her experience as a foster youth gives her insight that differs from that of policymakers and practitioners, Brisia Gutierrez, 25, strives every day to make her voice heard as an advocate for change.

"I try to remind current and former foster youth that they don't need to prove their worthiness," said Brisia, who emancipated from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) foster system at age 21 after 10 years in care. "We have the ability to look at the system with a critical lens, but also in a way that seeks to make it better for the next generation."

Brisia became involved with DCFS's Director's Advisory Council (DAC) in early 2020 through her position as an outreach and engagement fellow with the Alliance for Children's Rights. She currently serves as a youth co-lead for the DAC, working alongside DCFS executive sponsors to plan and facilitate monthly meetings that bring together DCFS staff, youth, families, caregivers, advocates and community partners to provide input around programming, policy and practices.

Initiated in 2013, the DAC was revamped in 2019 to bring those with lived experience, including current and former foster youth ages 18-25, to the forefront as active participants and drivers of change. This movement — from a predominantly DCFS-led group to a partnership with youth — reflected a broader goal to create a space for open, two-way communication between DCFS leadership and the youth and families served. The intention was, and continues to be, to give youth a chance to play a direct role in shaping Departmental priorities.

Alicia Smith, 28, another young leader and former foster youth, works closely with Brisia and the DCFS executive sponsors to plan and move the work of the DAC forward. She credits her work with the DAC with helping her channel her passion for helping other youth in foster care and inspiring her to pursue a graduate degree in social work.

"I always wanted to help others. But getting to know the system through the DAC shifted my perspective and showed me that I could have an impact, both at a micro and macro level," said Alicia, who entered foster care at age 9 along with her siblings.

Both Brisia and Alicia are exceedingly proud of the group's work to inform DCFS policies around case planning and the Transitional Independent Living Plan, making the policy language more accessible and "youth friendly." The DAC developed Youth Policy Guides to distill and simplify key information in dense Departmental policies and was also instrumental in informing upcoming modules to be added to the DCFS training curriculum that will help social workers meaningfully engage with youth when it comes to case planning.

Currently, the group is exploring the concept of "holistic stability" for children and youth in foster care, a term that encompasses not only stability in placement but also in areas such as health,



*Alicia Smith* knows that the work she is doing now as a youth leader on the DCFS Director's Advisory Council is going to make a positive impact on youth in foster care in the future.

finances, education, employment and supportive relationships. The DAC hopes to explore how the concept of holistic stability can help give youth the autonomy to decide what factors are most important for them to succeed.

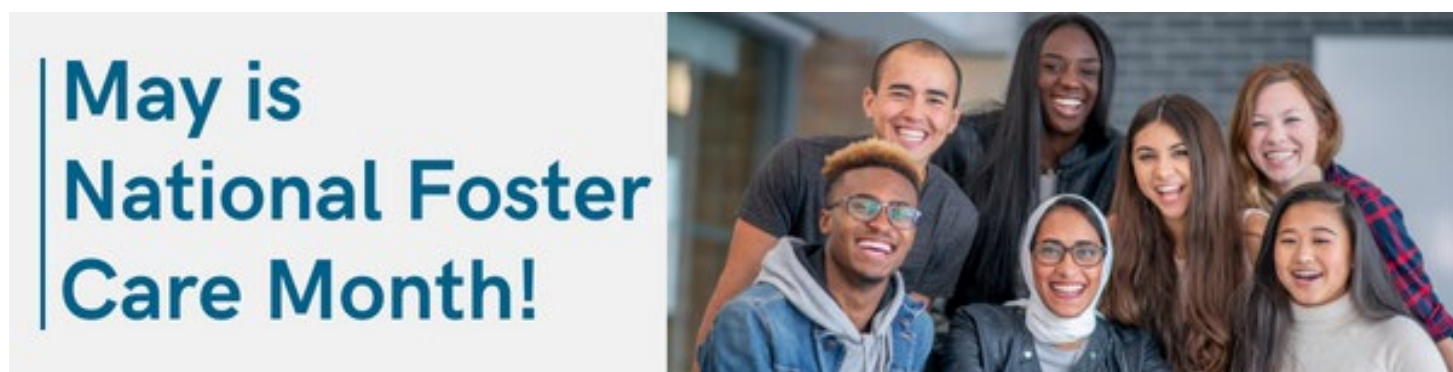
Both young women feel that the DAC has been a great way to uplift the voices of those with lived experience, influence decision-making and open doors for expanded engagement in other areas across DCFS and with outside organizations.

"I've been so proud to watch our young leaders on the DAC grow from wondering 'Why are we here?' to really taking the reins and becoming leaders within this space," Brisia said. "It's great to see them excited and empowered to continue this work."

Alicia agrees, noting that by tapping into firsthand accounts, the DAC can help to bring about tangible policy and systems change that children, youth and families can see and understand.

"A lot of young people feel like they don't have a platform where they can speak their mind, but there is so much value in hearing the stories and experiences of those who have been there," she said. "I appreciate that the DAC creates a nonjudgmental space for us to connect with DCFS leadership, share our stories and frustrations, present our input and really work with the Department to identify solutions that can actually solve problems."

Alicia added, "I encourage youth to speak up, whether it's through the DAC or in another forum. Even if you feel like your opinion doesn't matter, don't be afraid to say what you think. You never know who might finally hear you!"



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