

NOVEMBER 2019

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WEDNESDAY  
**MAY 30**

## A LOOK AT THE BIGGER PICTURE: ADVOCATING FOR YOUTH THROUGH POLICY

**May 30, 2012**

Every year almost 30,000 youth age out of the foster care system. For most of them, they're suddenly on their own—responsible for finding a place to live, managing their money, shopping for food and clothing, and for some continuing their education. But what happens when they learn that they can't make it on their own yet? Should they be given the option of returning to the system?

“Yes, under a trial discharge program,” said third-year law student Melissa Zeidler. In addition to providing legal representation for children and youth in dependency cases, law students in the Children’s Advocacy Clinic have the option to engage in the process of policy development—the option that Zeidler chose to pursue during her two semesters at the clinic.



Melissa Zeidler '12

During her time at the clinic, Zeidler researched laws regarding youths who leave agency care upon turning 18-years-old for a trial basis, often referred to as trial discharge programs. She then presented the results of her research to counties which are developing their own policies on trial discharge programs.

“Many times foster youth who are approaching the age of 18 believe they are ready for the real world and choose to leave care—only to learn they may not be able to do everything on their own. The problem is after they choose to leave, they can't come back. A trial discharge period would allow youth to test the waters and return to agency care if they were not ready to be independent,” Zeidler explained.

While there is no state mandate requiring the adoption of trial discharge policies, the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare, as well as the federal Administration for Children and Families, strongly encourage courts to do so. “Agencies have been a little hesitant to develop the program, due to concerns that they will be liable for actions of the youth who have left their care. After researching Pennsylvania case law and Supreme Court decisions governing the issue, we determined that there are very limited ways in which the agency would be liable. Our goal was to inform the agencies that they won't be liable for the actions of the young adults.

Zeidler worked with autistic children at SUNY Binghamton while pursuing her undergraduate degree, so she's familiar with this line of work. “I worked with children with disabilities in college. While I liked helping them in the classroom setting, I thought that a law degree would allow me to advocate for children on a large scale through policy, instead of one by one by one,” Zeidler said.

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What about foster youth who'd like to further their education by going to college? The percentage of former and current foster youth entering college has been found to be as low as 2 percent. The low-retention rate correlates directly with the insufficient support available for foster youth. What resources are available to them to increase their chances of succeeding?



During her semester at the clinic, legislative and policy intern Kristina Dahmann '13 has been working on a project regarding foster youth who want to attend college. "After I conducted research of other universities around the nation that have programs designed specific for student foster youth, I analyzed the resources at Penn State's University Park campus and compared them to these programs. I then compiled my results into a report detailing what programs Penn State already offers for foster youth transitioning to college and what it could do to improve its resources for foster youth," Dahmann explained.

But the project didn't end there. Dahmann also created a resource guide specifically for foster youth who are students at Penn State, as well as a guide for foster youth generally who are considering the option of going to college. The goal of the resource based webpage is to give these youth a single source with all of the resources available to them at Penn State. It not only provides them with the resources but also identifies point people who have volunteered to be available to answer questions for these students. All three resource guides are available in the resource area of the websites of the Children Advocacy Clinic and the Center on Children and the Law.

"I enjoy policy work because it provides the opportunity to both combine aggregate individual problems and give one child a large voice. Foster children and youth fight against a lot of odds to succeed, so to make change on a larger systemic scale is extremely rewarding," Dahmann said.

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