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**In Unprecedented Survey, Hundreds of WA State Foster Youth
Relate Their Experiences**

*Despite Very Difficult Challenges, Most Share Optimism About the Future,
With High Hopes and Aspirations*

The most extensive single-state survey of foster youth anywhere in the country was released by Washington State officials today, as part of the state's efforts to reform its foster care system. It is one of the only surveys of foster youth in which they were questioned directly about their experiences. The survey is part of a broad reform effort that began in 2004, after the State settled the *Braam vs. State of Washington* lawsuit brought by both state and national advocacy groups to improve its foster care system.

More than 700 youth aged 15 to 18 were surveyed by phone on a range of issues, including education, caseworker relationships, health and safety, contact with parents and siblings, overall treatment, and plans for the future. Additionally, about 35 current and former foster youth ages 14 to 20 were also interviewed face-to-face in discussion groups, where they talked about the same issues raised in the survey. The survey participation rate was high – 706 of the 879 youth and/or caregivers successfully contacted agreed to be interviewed. This reflects what interviewers experienced in conducting the surveys– foster youth are very interested in offering their views and sharing their experiences.

Jim Theofelis, Executive Director of the Mockingbird Society, a state-wide youth advocacy organization, said the high response rate demonstrates the passion and commitment of youth to improving their lives and communities.

“They want to be engaged and, indeed, to be leaders in the social justice effort to build a world-class child welfare system,” said Theofelis, stressing the importance of the survey in effecting real change. “The young people in our community have done their part. It is now time for us to do ours.”

“No one knows what you want better than you. This survey finally asks foster youth what *they* think about their situation in Washington State foster care,” said Diamonique Walker, a youth in Washington’s foster care system who is working with Mockingbird to bring about reform.

Julian Barrington, another Washington foster youth working with the Mockingbird Society, added, “It is the echoing voices of foster youth that invoke a sense of urgency to reform a broken foster care system.”

Survey Results

The survey reveals that while many youth in foster care face a very difficult reality – frequent placement and school changes, no contact with family/siblings, lack of education and employment support and services – they are generally positive about their experience in foster care and optimistic about their futures. More than 70 percent said they hope to attend college. Yet, sadly, the majority of youth said the foster care system fails to provide the necessary resources and guidance to help them fulfill their goals.

In addition, while the many youth related positive experiences in the system, hundreds of others did not. The survey was conducted in spring and summer 2008 and asked youth about their experiences during 2007.

Experience With the System and Caseworkers:

- Underscoring their resilience, youth were surprisingly positive about their general treatment in foster care; 88 percent said the system had treated them somewhat or very well.
- At the same time, less than half (44 percent) of youth had monthly visits with their social workers – the main connection to the agency and to services, and 12 percent said they did not even know their caseworker’s name. Monthly visits are now required for all youth in care, and were the focus of a recent successful court action by the Plaintiffs in *Braam*.
- Less than half of youth (43 percent) were very satisfied with the quality of support provided by their social worker. More than one-quarter (26 percent) were dissatisfied, with most complaining that the social worker didn’t listen/communicate and/or didn’t follow through.

Experience in Their Foster Care Placements:

- While many youth spoke positively of their current placements, the reality for many is still one of significant instability – a major focus of the *Braam* lawsuit. Almost 20 percent

of youth reported having moved more than 10 times during their years in foster care. Only half of youth were in the same placement for all of 2007.

- While the majority of youth felt positive about their placements, hundreds of others had significant problems. About one-quarter reported that they ran away from their placements; most because they didn't get along with their foster parents or family and/or didn't like the placement. Additionally, 14 percent said that at some point another person in their placement had made them feel unsafe.

Goals and Preparation for the Future:

- On the whole, foster youth have ambitious goals, but are not connected to programs designed to help them achieve their goals or live independently.
- Foster youth reported high educational goals (71 percent said they hope to achieve an associate's degree or higher). While 85 percent said they are very well or somewhat prepared to meet their educational goals, only about half had heard of four different programs aimed at helping foster youth go to college.
- Only 38 percent of older youth surveyed said they were invited to a required "shared planning" meeting to discuss their transition from foster care. Under the *Braam* settlement, the Department must raise this to 75 percent. An overwhelming majority (94 percent) of youth who were invited reported that they had participated or would be participating.

The survey was conducted by researchers at the Social & Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University. Unlike other past surveys of older youth or foster care alumni, this survey focused on one state and on current foster youth and current conditions in the system. Additionally, this survey was not a sample, but attempted to reach all 1,679 youth between 15 and 18 in the foster care system in Washington in 2007.

Attorneys for the children represented in the *Braam* suit highlighted the importance of this survey to the reform process.

"We think it is incredibly important to have youth voices be a part of the reform process and we hope this survey will serve as a nationwide model," said Bryn Martyna, an attorney at the National Center for Youth Law, one of the organizations that filed the *Braam* lawsuit.

For more information on the Mockingbird Society, contact Jim Theofelis at the Mockingbird Society, 206-323-5437

The Braam vs. State of Washington lawsuit was brought on behalf of thousands of foster children in the state of Washington who had been bounced from home to home by the foster care system, and focused on the multiple harms resulting from this constant instability. The case was settled in July 2004, after the Washington State Supreme Court held that foster children had significant constitutional rights that could not be disregarded, even due to lack of funding for key programs.

For more information on the Braam reform process, go to www.braamkids.org

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