

September 11, 2024
Nykia Gatson
Verbal Testimony
SOUL Family Legal Permanency Option Update

Chairperson Concannon and Members of the Committee, my name is Nykia Gatson. As a lived expert currently serving on the Authentic Youth and Family Engagement Subgroup, I have seen firsthand how meaningful engagement transforms outcomes for youth and families. Authentic youth and family engagement is essential for ensuring that young people and their families are fully empowered in planning and decision-making processes that directly affect their lives.

This subgroup aims to strengthen youth and family engagement practices actively identifying needs and resources that support success. **Authentic youth engagement** is crucial for the implementation of the SOUL permanency option through continuous conversations about how to serve families while centering the unique needs of each youth and family.

The work of this subgroup bridges the gap between youth engagement and successful outcomes for SOUL families. Through intentional and strategic conversations, we are able to ensure that young people are fully involved in planning and decision-making regarding their futures. The SOUL Family model emphasizes that young people must be actively and meaningfully engaged in the permanency planning process. This means creating inclusive planning meetings where both youth and families truly partner in decision-making and feel valued and heard.

Serving on this subgroup has given me the honor of also serving as a trainer for the Department for Children and Families (DCF) through the Foundational Knowledge of SOUL Family Legal Permanency training, further highlighting the importance of authentic engagement in creating lasting change for youth and families.

Thank you committee for the opportunity to share my insights today and for championing policies and practices that elevate the voices of youth and families affected by foster care.

Nykia Gatson