

# Facing Foster Care in Alaska

Mental Health Services and Foster Care



# Facing Foster Care in Alaska Mental Health Services

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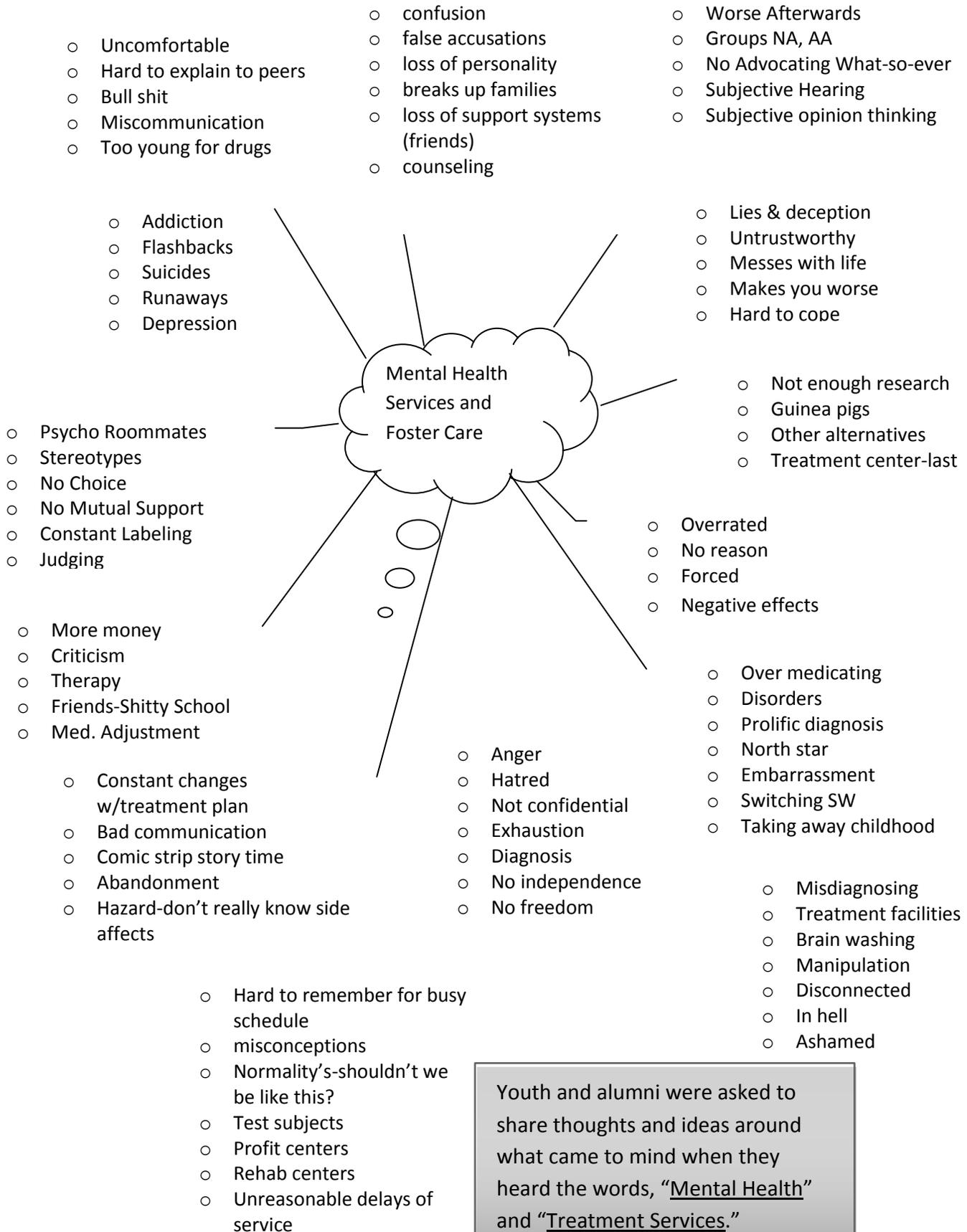
*Our Mission is to improve the foster care system through sharing our experiences, supporting and educating youth and social services and implementing positive change in society as a whole.*

In 2003, a group of dedicated foster care youth and alumni from across Alaska came together to share their issues and form a Youth Advisory Board. In 2004, the group adopted the name Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA). FFCA is dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth in foster care through developing and sustaining a statewide organization that will continue to work towards supporting foster youth and improving the foster care system. FFCA members are dedicated to advocating for improvements in the areas of education, mental health, permanency, disproportionality, independent living, and the overall well-being of children and youth in Alaska's foster care system.

Since their inception, the members of FFCA have been speaking out about mental health and treatment services of children and youth in foster care, and offering alternative solutions. With overwhelming feedback from youth and alumni of foster care regarding the issues of mental health and treatment services, the members FFCA came together in November of 2008 to brainstorm ideas and create possible solutions or alternatives to traditional treatment. This document encompasses their ideas and gives insight into what youth and alumni across Alaska believe is the best way to deal with the issues they face when being placed in foster care.

The content of this document reflects only the opinions and ideas of Facing Foster Care in Alaska members, and should not be viewed as the opinions or ideas from any state or private agencies.

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Youth and alumni were asked to share thoughts and ideas around what came to mind when they heard the words, "Mental Health" and "Treatment Services."

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## Alternatives and Possible Solutions

### **The decreased use of psychiatric medications**

In their 2008 Policy Agenda, FFCA members called for Decreased use of Psychotropic Medication for Alaska's foster youth. Many of Alaska's youth and alumni complain about being prescribed psychotropic medications after entering the foster care system for symptoms of depression, anxiety, trauma, attachment issues, and misbehavior. The youth and alumni of FFCA feel that these are all normal symptoms of child maltreatment and dealing with all that comes out of being placed in foster care. There has been a national focus on the use of psychotropic medications being over-prescribed for children and youth in foster care. FFCA members have also complained about side-effects caused by these medications resulting in a decreased ability to focus on their education as well as function in everyday society. The youth and alumni of FFCA would like to see that the prescription of psychotropic medications for Alaska's foster children and youth is decreased and reviewed more closely.

### **The right to be informed**

Many of Alaska's foster children and youth don't know their rights in regards to mental health and treatment services. The members of FFCA believe that service providers should inform children and youth in foster care about their rights in regards to their treatment plan. During the November 2008 FFCA retreat, one member commented that he did know his rights, but if he did refuse medication he would be placed in North Star. FFCA members would like to see that all children and youth in foster care are informed of their rights and the repercussions if they choose not to comply with their treatment plan.

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## **Building Relationships**

The members of FFCA believe that one of the best ways to deal with the emotional issues they face when entering foster care is through building and maintaining healthy relationships with family, friends, and permanent connections with a caring adult. The bulleted list below outlines the ideas FFCA members came up with regarding relationships.

- Trust Building opportunities
- Freedom
- Personal time
- Family Relationships/connections/visits
- Mentors
- Having good listeners
- Supporting dreams/hopes
- Non-judgmental relationships
- Permanent connection
- Getting to know us
- Talking/venting
- Acknowledgment
- Praise
- Constant affective communication
- Not relishing diagnosis/medication
- Cut out the unnecessary
- Understanding
- More homes
- Preparation for the real world
- Being placed in a stable understating home
- Extra time with peers
- Keeping siblings together
- Listen to what we have to say
- Pay attention to our needs
- We need more communication w/family & friends
- Do not separate youth and children
- If meds are absolutely necessary inform us what there for and what the side effects are
- Effective communication with social workers and GAL's

## **Creating a plan with the client/self determination**

Over the years, FFCA members have continuously complained about treatment plans being written for them rather than with them. Many of the youth and alumni speak out about how they have no idea what's in their treatment plan or case plan. The members of FFCA believe that they cannot affectively work on their treatment plan or case plan if they do not know what is in it or don't have a say in the process of creating it. FFCA would like to see that service providers are working with children and youth to develop a plan that outlines what the children and youth feel they need to work on in order to become productive members of society.

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## The right to be “Normal”

Many of Alaska’s foster children and youth complain about standing out among their peers and not being able to participate in the same activities as other young people. They say they are constantly going to appointments for counseling, medication adjustments, group therapy, family therapy, ect. The members of FFCA believe that the best treatment for depression, anxiety, attachment issues, and other behaviors that are often diagnosed in foster children and youth, can be treated by giving them the opportunity to be involved with school, community, and family events. The bulleted lists below outlines the ideas that FFCA members came up with as alternatives to the various therapy and other treatment related appointments.

### Extra Curricular Activities

- Sports/Clubs
- Banking/financial skills
- Therapeutic activities
- Massage
- Journaling
- Self advocacy/empowerment
- No drugs
- Foster home with a pet
- FFCA
- Service Projects

### Self Expression

- Star watching
- Poetry
- Music
- Art
- Cooking
- Life skills
- Freedom/choice

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## **Definitions (According to FFCA)**

Youth- A young person in foster care

Alumni- A person who was in foster care at some point during their life

For more information about Facing Foster Care in Alaska please visit

[http://www.alaskacasa.org/facing\\_foster\\_care\\_in\\_alaska.htm](http://www.alaskacasa.org/facing_foster_care_in_alaska.htm)

or

<http://www.myspace.com/ffca>

This document was drafted by FFCA President Amanda Metivier using the feedback from the FFCA members that attended that November 2008 FFCA retreat in Anchorage. For questions regarding the content of this document please contact Amanda Metivier at [facing\\_fostercare@yahoo.com](mailto:facing_fostercare@yahoo.com) or call 230-8237.