



# GUIDE SECTIONS:

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“

**I'M A SURVIVOR,  
I'M NOT GON' GIVE UP,  
I'M NOT GON' STOP,  
I'M GON' WORK HARDER.”**

- DESTINY'S CHILD

## **WHO'S ON MY TEAM?**

**CASEWORKER:**

**KIDVOICE CASE ADVOCACY SPECIALIST:**

**TRANSITION PLANNER:**

**YOUTH COACH:**

**YOUTH SUPPORT  
PARTNER (YSP):**

**EDUCATION LIAISON:**

**INFORMAL SUPPORT:  
(SUCH AS A RELATIVE, TEACHER  
OR SPORTS COACH)**

**SEE PAGE 10 FOR DEFINITIONS**

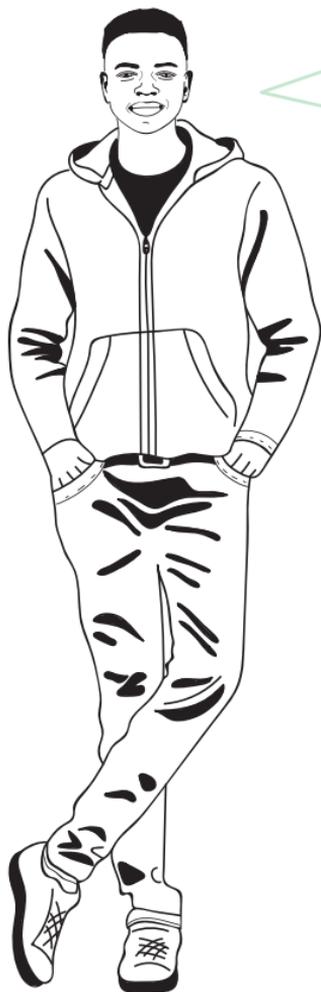
## WHY AM I HERE AND WHAT IS FOSTER CARE?

## SECTION 2



### HEY THERE, I'M QUEEN.

You haven't done anything wrong. You're probably feeling lots of feelings right now and that's okay. You're allowed to feel what you feel. You are loved and wanted. You're here for your own safety and wellbeing, but it's totally normal to miss your family and to want to go home. We're going to do our best to make sure that you don't just survive in life... but that you also THRIVE.



**YO, MY NAME IS ANONYMOUS.**

Being in care changed my mindset. I believe that you can learn from this experience and be stronger than you ever thought you could be. Learn everything you can—the more you learn, the better. My sister Queen says I can be rude sometimes, but I'm just doing what I've needed to do to survive. You might find yourself being rude sometimes too, and that's okay. You're a survivor just like us. Just know that working through hard things by talking about them helps us move past them faster.



## AWESOME POSSUM, HERE.

We know this isn't easy for you, and you might not want to talk about bad things that have happened. We'll do our best to help you bounce back from those bad things, and help you deal with being in foster care. It can be overwhelming for everyone. Real talk: having to leave your family can make things feel even worse. Know that you're not alone, and if you ever need anything, you can reach out to the Youth Support Partners. The YSP's are mentors in their early 20's who have experience in foster care and can help guide you through it. To learn more about the YSP's, visit [www.alleghenycounty.us](http://www.alleghenycounty.us).

## **I'VE JUST BEEN REMOVED FROM MY HOME. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?**

Within 72 hours of leaving your home, you'll likely have a shelter hearing at Family Court. We will want to know if the placement you're in is right for you. If you don't think it's right, let your attorney and judge know! If you haven't had a hearing within 72 hours, let your caseworker know.

## **TIPS FOR TALKING TO ADULT SUPPORTERS**

Good communication is great for everyone. When speaking to your adult supporters, try to use "I" statements like "I need...", "I feel...", and "I want..." to express yourself. Be sure to let them know about any family members that you think might be able to stay with.

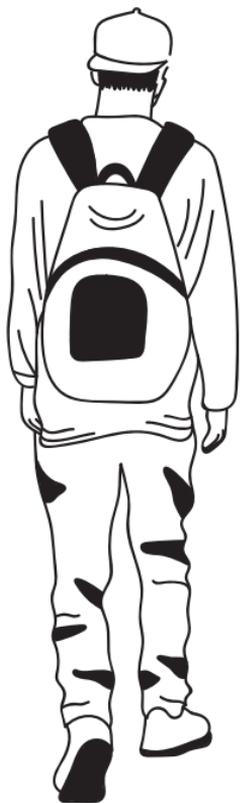
## **JUST SAY NO TO STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE!**

If an adult or other youth speaks to you in a disrespectful way or calls you names, make sure to tell your caseworker or speak up for yourself using "I feel" statements.

## **SOME GOOD QUESTIONS FOR YOUR CASEWORKER ARE:**

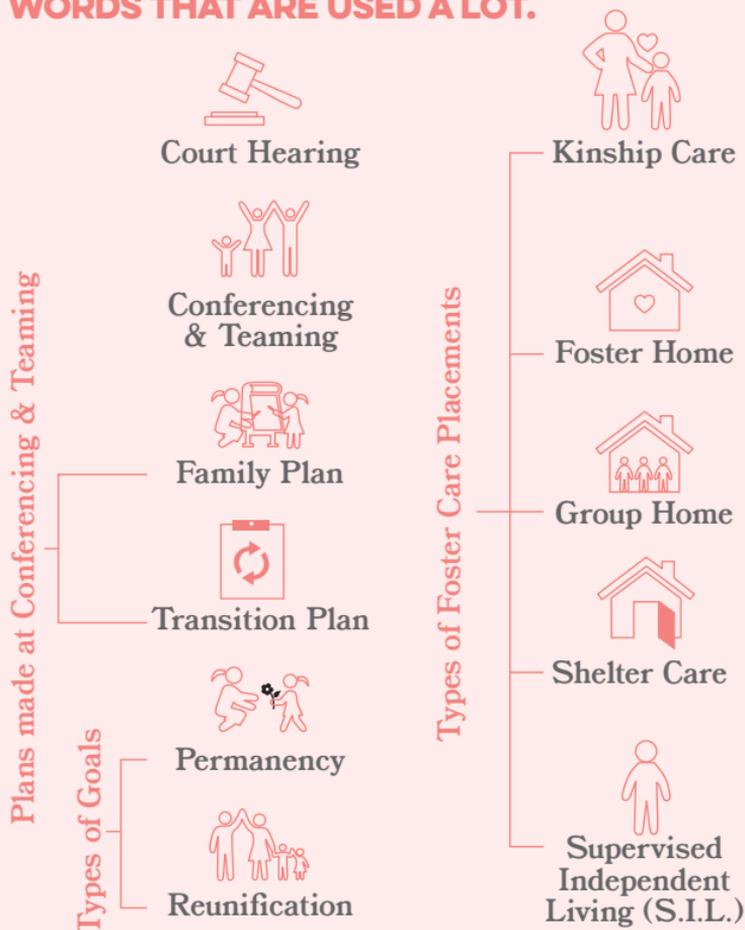
How do I prepare for the court hearing?

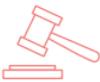
What's the best plan for my safety needs?



**WHAT ARE YOU  
TALKING ABOUT?  
(DEFINITIONS)**

**THERE ARE A LOT OF MOVING PARTS  
IN CHILD WELFARE AND A LOT OF  
DEFINITIONS. HERE ARE SOME  
WORDS THAT ARE USED A LOT.**



**COURT HEARING:**

A proceeding before a judge or hearing officer.

**CONFERENCING & TEAMING:**

An approach to foster care where families and caseworkers meet to make decisions together about the future. Youth have a right to be there, participate, and invite others to participate. It's important for families to set goals in these meetings, though sometimes there are court-ordered requirements also called "non-negotiables" that families must complete.

**FAMILY PLAN:**

A plan that families, caseworkers, and other team members make together at Conferencing & Teaming meetings to determine what service(s) or assistance is necessary to preserve or reunify families, and also focuses on permanency and transition.

**FOSTER HOME:**

Adults who provide you with a home when it is not safe for you to live in your own home. The individual(s) providing the home are required to be licensed.

**GROUP HOME:**

A group home is a place where many youth live together with adult supervision. They are sometimes called "congregate care."



### **KINSHIP CARE:**

Is a foster home where you live with family or a family friend while in foster care.



### **PERMANENCY:**

A legally permanent, nurturing family for every youth. A youth in foster care is determined to have achieved permanency when any of the following occurs: (1) The youth leaves foster care to reunify with his or her family; (2) the child is legally adopted; (3) the youth is discharged from foster care to the care of a legal guardian; or (4) the youth achieves independence.



### **REUNIFICATION:**

Reunification is when you are in temporary out-of-home care and you return to your family of origin. When first entering care, the primary goal for youth is reunification.



### **SHELTER CARE:**

These are temporary placements with other youth in an institutional setting until more permanent living environment is found.



### **SUPERVISED INDEPENDENT LIVING (S.I.L.):**

A placement in which a youth 16 years of age or older who is still in the care of the county child welfare agency lives in an apartment and receives services from the county or private provider agency. These placements help prepare older youth for handling the responsibilities of being an adult. In this guide, when we use the term SIL, we are talking about a type of placement.



## TRANSITION PLAN:

When you turn 14, and before you are discharged from care, you should have a discharge plan that includes a safe and stable place to live, a job, financial aid for education, health insurance, medical and/or mental health treatment providers, emergency contacts, your health records, and your school records. While you should be working on your transition plan as early as a year or two before you plan to leave the system, the law now requires that this plan be made at least 90 days before you leave care.

“

**ALWAYS REMEMBER  
THAT YOU ARE  
BRAVER THAN YOU  
BELIEVE, STRONGER  
THAN YOU SEEM,  
SMARTER THAN YOU  
THINK, AND TWICE AS  
BEAUTIFUL AS YOU'D  
EVER IMAGINED.”**



**(DEFINITIONS)**

**YOU MIGHT GET TO KNOW A FEW OF THESE PEOPLE...**



Parent



Youth Coach



Parent Advocate



Youth Support Partner (YSP)



Foster Parent



Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)



Caseworker



Lawyer



Education Liaison (E.L.)



Judge/Hearing Officer



KidsVoice Child Advocacy Specialist



Transition Planner

**YOU CAN WRITE THE NAMES OF YOUR TEAM IN SECTION 1 OF THIS GUIDE.**



**PARENT:**

Your mother or father.

**PARENT ADVOCATE:**

This is a lawyer that represents your parent in court. If you have a child that is court active, you may also qualify to have a parent advocate to represent as you as parent in your child's case.

**COURT-APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE (CASA):**

This is a person who is appointed by the court to look at all aspects of your case and to report to the judge. Not all youth have a CASA.

**CASEWORKER:**

A caseworker is an Allegheny County agency social worker who is responsible for coordinating your family's foster care case.

**EDUCATION LIAISON:**

A professional who will assist you with anything related to high school or post-secondary education. Ed Liaisons can help with school, make certain you on track to graduate if you change schools, and help you go to college or a training program after high school, if that is your goal. They help youth ages 14 - 24.

**FOSTER PARENT:**

The person who helps you meet your daily needs while in a foster home placement.

**LAWYER:**

All youth in the dependency system have lawyers who represent them in court at no cost. Sometimes this lawyer is called a child advocate or

guardian ad litem (GAL). When you go to court, there will also be other lawyers at hearings. Your parent(s) may be represented by lawyers, and Allegheny County CYF is represented by a lawyer who is often called the solicitor. In Allegheny County, your lawyer is from KidsVoice or the Office of Conflict Counsel. KidsVoice youth are assigned a lawyer and child advocacy specialist.

**JUDGE/HEARING OFFICER:**

The public official appointed to decide cases in the court of law.

**KIDSVoice CHILD ADVOCACY SPECIALIST:**

A KidsVoice Child Advocacy Specialist is a social service professional with expertise in social work, mental health, education or child development.

**TRANSITION PLANNER:**

A CYF employee who helps you develop a plan with achievable goals for succeeding at school, in out-of-care programs, at work, in the community, in your family, and as an adult.

**YOUTH COACH:**

Youth Coaches work at the 412 Youth Zone and help youth aged 16 to 24 to set goals and achieve them.

**YOUTH SUPPORT PARTNER (YSP):**

A Youth Support Partner is a professional mentor with lived experience in the foster care system who can help guide you through the foster care system.

## (DEFINITIONS)

## SECTION 3

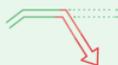
**THERE ARE A FEW DIFFERENT TYPES OF COURT HEARINGS, AND THIS IS THE ORDER THAT THEY MIGHT BE IN.**



Shelter Hearing



Dependency Hearing



Aggravated Circumstances Hearing



Permanency/In-Home Review Hearing



Goal Change Hearing



Termination of Parental Rights Hearings



Adoption Finalization Hearings



Disability Hearing (SSI)  
(This hearing is for disability issues and is not related to dependency).

**COURT HEARINGS MAY NOT BE A LOT OF FUN, BUT THEY'RE IMPORTANT AND YOU'RE REQUIRED TO ATTEND THEM.**



**SHELTER HEARING:**

Informal hearings scheduled by a CYF caseworker that occur within 72 hours of after you have been removed from your home. The purpose of this hearing is to decide whether or not continued placement is needed.

**DEPENDENCY HEARING:**

A hearing where the court determines if a youth requires some care or supervision by CYF due to reasons that include but are not limited to: 1) the youth has been abused or neglected; 2) the youth does not have someone to care for them; 3) the youth is habitually truant (aka absent) from school; 4) the youth is determined to be “ungovernable”; etc.

**AGGRAVATED CIRCUMSTANCES HEARING:**

Hearings that deal with extreme situations that endanger your safety and may excuse CYF from efforts to prevent a home removal or reunify your family.

**PERMANENCY/IN-HOME REVIEW HEARING:**

Also called “review hearings”, this is when the court reviews your case and this happens at least once every three to six months. You can and should be present at these hearings so you can tell the judge how you feel about your goals and your placement.



## **GOAL CHANGE HEARING:**

The same as a “permanency hearing,” it initiates the permanent removal from your parents. These hearings are held before a Family Court judge who determines whether reasonable efforts have been made toward reunification. If the efforts have not been successful then the judge will approve a change in the Family Service Plan goal from reunification to another type of permanency, such as adoption.



## **TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS HEARINGS:**

Before a youth can be adopted, Allegheny County must ask the court to terminate the rights of the biological parents. If the court terminates the parents’ rights, the youth can be adopted. A parent whose rights have been terminated does not have a right to any information regarding the youth, a right to make decisions about the youth’s education or medical treatment, or a right to visit the youth.



## **ADOPTION FINALIZATION HEARING:**

The last legal step in the adoption process. Only after finalization do the adoptive parents have legal rights and responsibilities for the child. Finalization is a unit of service offered through the Statewide Adoption & Permanency Network (SWAN) program. Youth above the age of 12 must provide their consent for an adoption. You can be adopted at any age.



## **DISABILITY HEARING (SSI):**

A hearing related to any personal disability needs. Disability hearings are held before an administrative law judge at the Bureau of Hearings & Appeals.

## **A FEW MORE THINGS YOU MIGHT HEAR A LOT**

### **412 YOUTH ZONE:**

A one-stop shop to help youth ages 16 - 24 transition into adulthood. There's a health clinic and child care, as well as help with services for safe, stable living arrangements, basic life-skill and social skill building, educational opportunities, assistance in preparing for and getting jobs, transportation assistance, recreation, fun events, and on-site laundry and showers. Lunch and dinner is provided Monday through Friday. Check the 412 Youth Zone Facebook page for their hours of operation. Located at 304 Wood Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15222.

### **ASSESSMENT:**

An individual conversation with you to identify any needs you might have for things like physical and mental health or substance use. They occur from the time you come to the attention of the CYF and continue until your case is closed.

### **CONCILIATION:**

The conciliation meeting is an opportunity to have your lawyer meet with lawyers from CYF and DHS to come up with an agreement about the type of support you need in order to be successful in your postsecondary education program.

### **CONSENT:**

Give permission for something to happen.

### **CYF:**

The Office of Children, Youth and Families within the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

CYF handles everything related to child welfare, including prevention and intervention when child abuse or neglect takes place.

### **DELINQUENCY:**

When the Juvenile Court finds that a youth has committed a delinquent act, the court finds the youth “delinquent.”

### **DHS:**

The Department of Human Services. DHS oversees child welfare, aging, behavioral health, and intellectual disabilities matters in Allegheny County.

### **EMANCIPATION:**

Judicial emancipation is a court order that says a youth under the age of 18 has the rights of an adult.

### **FAMILY VISITING:**

In-person visits between you and your family (parents and siblings) when you're in out-of-home care. Visits can be in the community or at a CYF office. They can be supervised or unsupervised, depending on any safety issues.

### **GRIEVANCE PROCESS:**

Grievance is another name for a complaint. If you're having problems with CYF or your provider agency, you can file a grievance. Your parents (birth, foster, and adoptive) can also file grievances to resolve their differences with a service provider or CYF through the Director's Action Line (DAL) at 1 (800) 932-0313.

### **MENTAL HEALTH:**

Mental health for young people refers to how they're reaching developmental and emotional milestones as they get older. Are you learning healthy social skills? How do you cope with problems? These are all things related

to mental health. Behavioral health is another term for discussing mental and emotional health, and choices and actions that affect your wellbeing. Therapy is often used to help make mental health better. It's like exercise for your brain!

### **NORMALCY:**

Federal law designed to promote as normal a life as possible for youth in foster care by allowing caregivers in all foster care placements to use the reasonable and prudent parent standard, or their best judgment, in making day-to-day decisions about youth in their care.

### **PERMANENCY:**

A legally permanent, nurturing family for every youth. A youth in foster care is determined to have achieved permanency when any of the following occurs: (1) The youth leaves foster care to reunify with his or her family; (2) the child is legally adopted; (3) the youth is discharged from foster care to the care of a legal guardian; or (4) the youth achieves independence.

### **PERMANENT LEGAL CUSTODIAN (PLC):**

A permanent legal custodian is someone who agrees to care for you and assumes custody of you until you become an adult. This may be a foster parent, relative, or someone else. If placed with a permanent legal custodian, your case would be closed from the child welfare system. Unlike with adoption, the rights of your biological parent(s) do not need to be terminated for PLC to be granted.

### **RESPIRE CARE:**

If your caregiver needs temporary relief, such as overnight or for a weekend, you may be temporarily placed in another home for that brief period of time.

**TRUANCY:**

Truancy is when a youth is chronically absent from school. It may happen because a parent or caregiver fails to enroll the youth in school or provide the appropriate homeschooling or needed special education training, or because a youth refuses to go to school, or because a youth has to take care of younger children.



## FOR YOUR HEALTH!

### HOW DO OUR BRAINS RESPOND TO TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES?

The brain creates “scripts” of how to respond in the present based on past outcomes & sensory information—smell, sound, emotion, situation.



### SENSES & THE BRAIN EXAMPLES:

The smell of glue reminds you of school.

A ringing bell makes you feel nervous—Am I late?



### THE BRAIN'S RESPONSE TO TRAUMA:

Trauma is a harmful event or situation that is difficult or impossible to understand why. Because humans are amazing, each person develops meaningful survival tools to adjust to trauma. Those tools become part of a new script, with the only goal of protecting yourself.

### SURVIVING SCRIPTS **VERSUS** THRIVING SCRIPTS:

- Keep Problems, Fears to Self **versus** Seeking Help
- Quick, Impulsive Actions **versus** Planned Goal

- Self-Harm **versus** Self-Soothe
- Always on Alert **versus** Relax with Guard Down
- Not Trusting/Too Trusting **versus** Can Identify Trustworthy People

Surviving Scripts are not bad.

In fact, surviving scripts are extremely helpful for protecting yourself in survival situations.

After a trauma, the brain sometimes incorrectly uses surviving scripts for ALL life situations, which is not necessary. To write new thriving scripts, humans need to practice thriving habits to fulfill potential & to achieve goals!

## YOU'RE NOT ALONE! YOUTH LEAVING FOSTER CARE HAVE 5 TIMES HIGHER RATES OF PTSD THAN YOUTH WHO HAVEN'T BEEN IN FOSTER CARE.

For help dealing with *any* mental health issues, ask an adult supporter to help you set up a therapy appointment or call 1 (412)-350-4457. For emergency situations, contact the 24-Hour Crisis Emergency Service hotline at 1 (888) 424-2287.

# SECTION 4

## WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS? REMOVAL/PLACEMENT



**IN FOSTER CARE, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO A SAFE, PROTECTIVE, AND COMFORTABLE LIVING ENVIRONMENT, PLUS:**



be explained your rights and given a copy of the Children in Foster Care Act

services that will help you stay with or return to your family

save any money that you have earned

clothes, healthy food and storage

contact information for everyone assigned to the case (caseworker, probation officer, etc)

stay in the school you went to before you were placed

the right to meet with your caseworker at least once a month

be free of discrimination based on race, religion, disability, gender, or sexual orientation



file a complaint with the Director's Action Line at 1 (800) 862-6783 if you feel you have been mistreated or your rights are being violated

reasonable efforts being made so you can be placed with your siblings



visit your siblings (if they are in care and you are not placed with them), and visits with your parents (depending on the safety assessment) every two weeks



Independent Living Services



medical, dental, and behavioral health treatment free of excessive medication



be placed with your own child if you are a parent unless a court has said that you cannot

be free from corporal punishment (punishment that uses physical force, threats, or verbal abuse)

communicate and visit privately with your lawyer and clergy, and practice or not practice any religion



## WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS? LGBTQ



WE'RE HERE, WE'RE QUEER,  
AND WE HAVE RIGHTS!

Allegheny County DHS supports LGBTQ youth. If you think you are not being treated with respect or have the support you need, tell your caseworker or a trusted adult.



**YOU ARE SPECIAL.  
YES YOU—THE ONE  
READING THIS.”**



## BYOA: BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE!

If you feel like you've been mistreated, speak up! Use “I feel” statements, tell your caseworker or another trusted adult, or report it to the Director's Action Line at 1 (800) 862-6783.

You can get paid to be a youth advocate in Allegheny County. They helped make this guide!

**SPEAKER'S BUREAU**  
For youth ages 14 & 15

**SITY**  
For youth ages 16 & up

Let your caseworker know if you're interested.

## SECTION 4

### WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS? COURT



**COURT HEARINGS ARE WHERE IMPORTANT DECISIONS GET MADE ABOUT YOUR LIFE. COURT CAN BE NERVE-WRACKING, BUT IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU SPEAK UP!**

In legal proceedings, you have the right to: ...

**TO LEARN ALL OF YOUR RIGHTS, VISIT [KIDVOICE.ORG](http://KIDVOICE.ORG)**

attend all court hearings where your case is reviewed



be consulted by the judge about your permanency and transition plans

be represented by a lawyer



meet with your lawyer

tell your lawyer where you want to live and what services you think you need to meet your goals

be provided with the contact information of your attorney and members of your integrated children's services planning team

have your lawyer do what is needed to help you get an appropriate placement and meet your needs

give an opinion about your placement, permanency and needs

keep your information confidential

Allegheny County Family Court, 440 Ross Street, Pittsburgh, Pa 15222



Ask the judge to appoint another lawyer for you if you don't think your lawyer is doing their job



**WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS? PERMANENCY**

**WHEN IT COMES TO PLANNING FOR YOUR FUTURE, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO:**

an Individual Service Plan (ISP) that explains your goals and needs and what is being done to meet them, including your responsibilities

an Education Liaison from age 14 until your 24th birthday (see pg. 10)

a Youth Coach if you are age 16 or older

an Independent Living Plan if you are age 14 or older

be present, have a say and participate in all the meetings where these plans are created

a detailed transition plan at least 90 days before you leave care (at age 18 or older) that reflects your individual needs and includes specific options on housing, health insurance, education, etc.

**TO LEARN ALL OF YOUR RIGHTS, VISIT [KIDVOICE.ORG](http://KIDVOICE.ORG)**

**THINGS THAT YOUR KIDVOICE CHILD ADVOCACY SPECIALIST (CAS) CAN HELP YOU WITH:**

- getting visits with your brothers, sisters, parents
- questions about court, your care plans, or your placement
- working with others involved with your case
- making sure all your needs are being met
- access to services until age 26
- any other concerns you have

## **WHAT SKILLS DO I NEED AS I BECOME AN ADULT, AND WHAT RESOURCES CAN HELP ME GET THERE?**

As you become an adult, you should know how to live on your own independently and do things like: set and achieve goals, do laundry, cook for yourself, get a job, make a budget and pay your bills on time, get a license to drive, go to the doctor and dentist, use public transportation, find and keep stable housing, and clean your living space. To learn about resources for YOU, visit:

**[WWW.STEELCITYSAFE.ORG](http://WWW.STEELCITYSAFE.ORG)**

**[WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/DHS.  
PROGRAMS](https://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/DHS.PROGRAMS)**

Youth 16 and older can also drop by the 412 Youth Zone at 304 Wood Street in downtown Pittsburgh for help with basic needs services, job placement, and more.

### **MY NOTES:**

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## SHOUTOUTS:

Youth Speaker's Bureau:  
**ARMANI, ASHANTI,  
BRANDON, DEON,  
JAIME, TRISTAN,  
MARQUISE, OLIVIA**

SITY:  
**CARSTEN, CRYSTAL, ISIS,  
A.J., DARREL, DIAMOND,  
MITCHELL, SKYE**

Youth Support Partners:  
**ANGELA, EDIE, LEONARDO,  
JALISHA, SHANTEY,  
KAIONA, JIMMY MACK**

KidsVoice Partners:  
**LEAH, SCOTT, JONATHAN**

412 Youth Zone:  
**KAYLEIGH**

SOGIE:  
**SHAUNA**

DHS Transition Planners:  
**ANNE, JAIME**

DHS Design Squad:  
**EMILY (WORKSHOP  
FACILITATION &  
DESIGN STRATEGY)  
MEREDITH (WORKSHOP  
FACILITATION, GRAPHIC  
DESIGN & ILLUSTRATION)**



**CHARACTER  
CONCEPTS  
CREATED  
BY YOUTH  
AT SITY AND  
SPEAKER'S  
BUREAU.**

Allegheny County  
Department of Human Services  
One Smithfield Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222

DAL: 1 (800) 862-6783

Allegheny Link: 1 (866) 730-2368

412 Youth Zone:  
304 Wood Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
(412) 902-4068

KidsVoice: (412) 391-3100

[www.alleghenycounty.us](http://www.alleghenycounty.us)





“

**I'M STILL STANDING,  
BETTER THAN I EVER  
DID.”**

**- ELTON JOHN**

