



## *Nobody Ages Out* Vision Statement

### OUR VISION

You Gotta Believe (YGB) envisions a day when every child leaving foster care is connected to an unconditionally committed, loving permanent family – when no child is asked to face adulthood alone.

We want **permanency solutions** to be the **primary strategies** used to meet the needs and secure the futures of foster youth facing the **terrifying and deeply lonely prospect** of aging out.

At YGB, we know that it is never too late for family. We also know that the power of the unconditional commitment of a loving family transforms young people's prospects of living happy, healthy and productive lives. We strive for the day when **Nobody Ages Out**—when through our programs and influence on the system, no child will leave foster care without a permanent family to support them throughout their life. This is their right.

**Adopting Older Kids And Youth**

## **YGB Background and Overview of Services**

You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc. (YGB) is one of a few organizations in the United States and the only organization in New York City that limits its practice to finding permanent parents and families for young adults, teens, and pre-teens in the foster care system.

We work with youth aged 10 and up, but specialize in older teens (16 to 21) getting close to aging out of care. We also work with youth who come from “broken adoptions”, many LGBTQ youth, and teens with babies who need a loving home to help break the cycle of being in foster care. YGB works with these children to find them adoptive parents before they age out of the foster care system and run the extremely high risk of becoming homeless.

Founded in 1995 by Pat O’Brien alongside adoptive parents and former foster care youths, YGB was created to meet New York City’s need for an adoption agency dedicated to the oldest youth in the foster care system.

Over the past 20 years, YGB has worked to connect more than 500 youth with permanent parents and trained and prepared hundreds of parents to make an unconditional, lifetime commitment to a teenager through moral and legal adoption. Every year, we work with more than 80 young people to connect them to permanent families—a number we are aiming to grow exponentially over the next few years.

YGB’s core services include:

- a) Recruiting, training, and certifying foster/adoptive parents;
- b) Connecting and placing foster youth with permanent parents/families;
- c) Providing ongoing support services pre- and post-placement;
- d) Training for partner organizations to improve recruitment and permanency outcomes;
- e) Regional/national advocacy to position teen permanency as a proven solution for foster youth facing the prospect of aging out; and
- f) Public education efforts through media and videos.

## ***The Problem: 25,000 Leave Care Alone Each Year***

Today, more than 400,000 children are in foster care in the U.S., and 100,000 of those youth are waiting to be adopted.<sup>1</sup> These adoption numbers do not include the thousands of young people on the verge of aging out of the foster care system without a family and for whom adoption is no longer even an identified goal. As many as 26,000 young people in the U.S. age out of foster care every year.<sup>2</sup> In the New York metropolitan area, more than 1,000 young people will age out of foster care this year and there are thousands of youth ages 15 to 20 in the ‘aging out pipeline’.

**A young person who ages out of care does so without the one thing they were promised when they entered foster care – a permanent parent to support them and guide them through life.**

## ***Our Solution: Nobody Ages Out Movement***

‘Aging Out’ is now in the national lexicon and can be heard on the nightly news, read about in national papers, and is the subject of multiple policy meetings and national conferences. Yet almost universally, the discussion around aging out is focused on providing young people housing, education, and jobs –

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i.e., *services* for youth we are admitting we have failed. ***The conversation is almost never about how to prevent aging out in the first place.***

Research indicates that youth who age out of foster care alone are more likely to experience **homelessness, unemployment, unplanned pregnancy, legal system involvement, substance abuse, and lack even the basic health care services.**<sup>1</sup> They are also **less likely to have a high school diploma, earn enough to support themselves, or participate in post-secondary education or training.**<sup>2</sup>

The personal challenges faced by these young people come with steep social costs. Independent Living programs have proved inadequate to prepare these young people for survival, and when polled, 50% of teens within these programs had no recorded sustainable living arrangements after discharge and no positive adults to count on. Essentially, they are set up to fail.

Rather than focus all of our energy on making life a little less painful for those who age out, YGB's Nobody Ages Out moves toward a solution that **prevents aging out at all.**



Our **BIG DREAM** is that nobody ages out.

21 is no longer a panic date.

In NYS, 800 youth are no longer thrown off a cliff on their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, nor suffering anxiety about turning 21.

NYS is realizing economic benefits of supporting youth after age 21.

Foster youth can explore opportunities and try new things, which most kids get.

Everyone has someone making an unconditional life commitment to them.

[www.seedimpact.org](http://www.seedimpact.org)

**Nobody Ages Out (NAO)** is a regional and national advocacy movement that includes an emerging network of child welfare agencies, social workers, youth, parents, and advocates. Led by YGB, NAO intends to focus the child welfare system, lawmakers, youth, and families on permanency solutions for older kids in foster care and build a groundswell of public support for foster youth who are systematically being “aged out.” Our intent is that every young person in foster care will have a family long before they reach the dreaded age of 21 when they “age out” of care and are, in essence, left without family or any support.

NAO's agenda has multiple levels of advocacy with systemic change as its destination. Key goals include:

- Building shared ownership of the NAO mission within and across agencies nationwide;
- Heightened awareness and interest in permanency solutions for older youth in foster care;
- Development of a strong NAO foster youth advocacy network to speak out on behalf of youth and their urgent need for permanency;
- Increased capacity for permanency through staff training at all levels of the system;
- New relationships and powerful allies through advocacy with lawmakers and policy makers;
- Changes in funding priorities – focus on connecting young people to families first with services to support young people in new families and communities; and
- Increased name recognition of YGB and NAO through promotion of our vision through multimedia products and outreach.

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<sup>1</sup> Casey Family Programs, *Improving Outcomes for Older Youth In Foster Care*, 2008:

[http://www.casey.org/resources/publications/pdf/WhitePaper\\_ImprovingOutcomesOlderYouth\\_FR.pdf](http://www.casey.org/resources/publications/pdf/WhitePaper_ImprovingOutcomesOlderYouth_FR.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Courtney, Dworsky, Ruth, Havlick & Bost, 2005

Leadership of YGB and other partners will plant the seeds needed to flip the child welfare discussion to solving the aging out problem through permanency, not just mitigating it through after care services. The NAO network, including partner agencies, sponsoring foundations, and the NAO Youth Collaborative & Speak Out Bureau, are developing an outreach strategy to engage agency leaders, child welfare policy and lawmakers, funders, the public and the media as stakeholders. This will involve meetings with lawmakers, funders, speaking at conferences, social media, blogs, etc.

**Our work is just beginning.** YGB is seeking funds to develop and execute the NAO pilot agenda for the first three years (2015- 2017) through four program activities:



The Johnson Family

- I. **PUBLIC ADVOCACY EFFORTS.** Leadership of YGB and other partners will plant the seeds needed to flip the child welfare discussion to solving the aging out problem through permanency, not just mitigating it through after care services. The NAO network, including partner agencies, sponsoring foundations, and the NAO Foster Youth Speak Out Bureau, will develop an outreach strategy to engage agency leaders, child welfare policy and lawmakers, funders, the public and the media as stakeholders. This will involve meetings with lawmakers, funders, speaking at conferences, social media, blogs, etc.
  
  - II. **NAO YOUTH MOVEMENT.** Other foster youth advocacy groups exist, but emphasis is most often placed on housing and traditional transitional supports. Through the NAO Youth Collaborative, former foster youth are engaged as Advocates for youth with a laser focus on permanency. The NAO Advocates are already in action with five active members. Just this year, the group has participated in, shared their stories, and spoken out during:
    - a. **Prospective Adoptive Parent Training Sessions:** In 2015, Speak Out members began participating in YGB training sessions for prospective adoptive parents. This has been incredibly powerful. Youth speakers are able to share their experiences and challenges as foster youth with prospective parents. They provide first-hand accounts of the challenges faced within a newly placed family. They give insight into the complex feelings behind being adopted and transitioning into a new family.
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Prospective parents who have benefitted from Speak Out members in their trainings have been deeply moved and motivated by their presence. This has proved to be a successful strategy in providing critical information to potential adoptive parents and will be continued.

- b. **Public Forums with Local Legislators and Administrators:** In 2015, Speak Out members have begun accompanying YGB staff to critically important meetings with leaders at New York City's Administration for Children's Services and other government agencies and leaders. Youth speakers have pleaded the case for funding for permanency solutions and have shared their stories before families and after families. When people have the opportunity to hear Speak Out members' voices, their attention is gained and minds are changed. As NOA continues to build momentum, our Speak Out members will have more opportunities for regional and national advocacy. We envision speaking engagement at legislative meetings and national conferences around the nation.
- c. **Interview with Media Outlets:** In guidance with and under the supervision of staff, Speak Out members will also be connected to media engagements and opportunities. YGB has a growing network of volunteer leadership with access to media. For example, in May 2015, YGB will be featured in an article about older foster youth in [Family Circle](#), a magazine with a national audience. As opportunities arise, Speak Out members will have the chance to share their stories and messaging with a growing public audience. As part of this work, a YGB supporter who is also a film maker, [Jill Andrevosic](#), produces videos for YGB highlighting the impact of permanency solutions on young people's lives (such as the Toles video). Her next video will focus on foster youth's lives before and after family placements
- d. **Participation at Public/National Events/Conferences:** Speak Out members will work closely with NAO Campaign network members, including YGB and other partner agencies, to participate in and present during regional and national public events and industry conferences. The goal will be to present foster youth welfare concerns and solutions from a permanency point-of-view, using personal stories and quantitative research to share the effectiveness of the approach and encourage industry-wide endorsement and use.
- e. **Outreach to Foster Youth in Care and with Families:** Speak Out members are already engaging in this approach. Members are actively connecting with foster youth in care to inform them about YGB and its recruitment and placement efforts. Members share their experience pre- and post-placement and encourage foster youth to consider adoption as a viable choice, rather than aging out alone. Speak Out members also connect with foster youth recently placed in new homes and families to serve as a support system, sharing their own experiences and challenges, listening to the challenges faced by the foster youth and adoptive parents, and helping to connect to resources within YGB.

III. **MONTHLY CASEWORKER TRAININGS.** Beginning in 2015, YGB will facilitate monthly "caseworker trainings" to establish a community of practice that engages ever-increasing numbers of caseworkers and advocates in the use of YGB's successful home-findings tools and approaches. The goal behind this initiative is to provide caseworkers with the best practices in permanency work, and to grow the number of agencies and caseworkers doing this work well.

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IV. **CURRICULUM TO TRAIN MODEL AGENCIES.** With the goal of developing a deeper training strategy for systemic change, YGB will develop and offer intensive trainings in a permanency curriculum to 3 to 4 agencies per year. In 2015, YGB will begin to develop the training curriculum. In 2016, it will administer the intensive training to the first agencies and develop a case study as a result, which will demonstrate meaningful/measurable outcomes, share lessons learned, and inform a formalized training program for more agencies. Through the training, agencies will be challenged to reform their thinking about what is possible through permanency and change their daily work practices and approaches. Staff will be trained in the best practices for recruitment of parents and youth, training prospective parents, and how to find permanent connections and families for youth. Participating agencies will also be expected to share the model and encourage other agencies to join. Over three to five years we envision developing a model that can be shared nationally.

## **More on the YGB NAO Youth Movement**

Because we believe that the system will never truly improve until we listen to and act upon the voices of youth and those who have lived the foster care system, we have seeded what is already proving to be a powerful tool in the fight for system change – the ***Nobody Ages Out Youth Movement***.

In just the first 6 months of their work, the group has participated in, shared their stories, and spoken out during:

- Prospective Adoptive Parent Training Sessions
- Public Forums with Local Legislators and Administrators:
- Interviews with Media Outlets
- Participation at Public/National Events/Conferences:
- Outreach to Foster Youth in Care
- Created and Delivered workshops to child welfare professionals, advocates, foster/adoptive parents, and youth in foster care.

### **Anni Keane, NAO Youth Collaborative Coordinator**



Anni Keane is a foster care alumna who has worked in the foster care system for over 13 years. She is a fierce advocate for youth and has touched the lives of hundreds of youth in care through her direct service and advocacy on their behalf. Anni leads the core group of Youth Advocates as part of the NAO Youth Collaborative. This involves providing overall strategy, meeting coordination, ensuring regular supervision, scheduling speaking and advocacy opportunities, and providing support and group leadership.

Anni, personally, spent time in the foster care system during her childhood and was adopted in her later youth years. She has been sharing her story publicly for many years on a local and national level, including as a panelist at a US Senate Caucus on Foster Youth and Homelessness. She is able to share her personal experiences with Speak Out Bureau members and serve as a source of ongoing support and inspiration.



## **Sharif Griggs, Youth Advocate**

Sharif spent nearly his entire life in the world of foster care and entered care for the second time when he was 13. His career in foster care was mostly spent in a residential treatment center and then the remainder in a group home. It was in this group home that he met his mother and was adopted at age 18 – nearly 19.

Currently, Sharif is pursuing his degree in Theatre and Communication and is working to hone his skills. He now uses his public speaking skills to advocate for youth still transitioning through care and to teach workers and potential parents that every child deserves a family. He hopes that his work with Nobody Ages Out will impact the future of the child welfare system and his advice to potential parents is "commit to your youth and do not waiver in your convictions, everything else will fall into place."



## **Brianna Hayes, Youth Advocate**

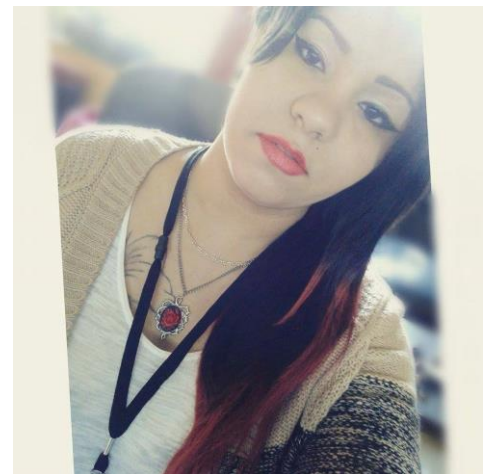
Brianna is 22 years old and identifies as a LGBT youth. She has been in foster care since she was 15 years old. Recently, she was granted an Exception to Policy and is still in care waiting for her apartment. Brianna believes things happen we can't always control, but we can always learn from them and grow stronger. People describe Brianna as passionate, funny, thoughtful, artistic and caring. She plans to attend college to study culinary arts and business management. She is working as a chef in training now.

She serves as a member of the YGB Youth Collaborative to help educate prospective permanent parents about what it is like to be a teenager in foster care and how they can best prepare for the responsibility they are about to take on. Her message to adults is "you don't always have to understand, but you should always be there to support young people the best ways you can." In this position she also meets with young people in care and helps them to open up to the possibility of having a lifetime family.

## **Anna Valerie Lynch, Youth Advocate**

Born in 1992 in New York City, Anna started her life in the foster care system at three years old. She was in and out of foster care throughout her childhood, and was placed in foster care for the long-term at age 13. Growing up, she was a confused little girl - confused about her family and herself.

Now Anna enjoys singing, writing poetry, and drawing. She loves animals, especially cats. She finds happiness in her friends and getting lost in her dreams. Anna aged out of care in October 2013. She now has her own apartment and is working on getting her life together. She works as a Youth Advocate for YGB's Nobody Ages Out Youth Collaborative because she believes no child should have to age out of care and face adulthood alone.



## Katherine Rando, Youth Advocate



Katherine is a 25-year-old mother of a 6-year-old boy. She entered foster care at age 10 and bounced around about eight times into different foster homes. When she was 12, she was placed in residential treatment and stayed there until age 16. During these years, she tried repeatedly to return to her birth mother, but it never worked out. In 2006, she met her foster mother, whom eventually adopted her after she had aged out at 22.

She recently earned an Associates Degree in Graphic Design. She serves as at NAO Youth Advocate to educate prospective permanent parents about what it is like to be a teenager in foster care and how they can best prepare for the responsibility they are about to take on. Her message to adults is "don't always take everything so personally. We as the youth don't say things to hurt you on purpose. Sometimes we just don't know how to express how we feel because so many people have hurt us in the past." In this position she also meets with young people in care and helps them to open up to the possibility of having a permanent family.

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## Three-Year Pilot Demonstration – Start-Up Resources

In the broadest terms, NOA pilot goals are to: a) develop individual, organizational and community leadership, b) promote effective cross-organizational collaboration, c) engage civic participation, and d) ratchet up both action research and public policy advocacy toward realizing our promise that **Nobody Ages Out**. Funds are needed for the following six essential elements of this project:

- 1) One lead staff member and YGB team members' time to co-coordinate the NAO Initiative, responsible to: **(\$100K annually, includes fringe)**
    - Develop and offer training, technical assistance and capacity building;
    - Support and co-facilitate monthly open casework meetings;
    - Lead provision of onsite training and technical assistance to the 3 to 4 agencies committed to intensive training in round one; and
    - Work closely and provide support for the NAO Youth Collaborative advisor.
  - 2) Technical Assistance funds will enable SEEDImpact and other experts to: **(\$30,000)**
    - Provide training for leadership development, public speaking, effective communications and team-building for the NAO staff and Youth Collaborative members;
    - Provide ongoing coaching and training of the NAO staff to support their effective leadership and co-facilitation of the initiative;
    - Build internal capacity and sustainability of YGB and NAO, through offering assessment, visioning and planning tools, with coaching to support integration; and
    - Offer assessment tools that will allow the initiative to capture baseline data and report increased performance, social impact and return on investment over time
    - Assist in the development and documentation of our curricula to allow for replication of the model and promote expansion of our practices beyond NYC and NYS.
  - 3) 2 Youth Advocates : **(\$50,000 annually)**
    - Youth Advocates are fully trained and supported by YGB and a member of our professional teams. Two part-time (21 hours/week) will support this specific campaign. Additional advocates supported through other funding.
    - Funding request includes part-time pay, fringe, training, support, travel, equipment, etc.
    - Light snacks provided at Youth Collaborative meetings, where appropriate.
  - 4) CEO leadership, team building, and advocacy: **(\$22,400 annually)**
    - National partnership and coalition building; relationship building and advocacy efforts with legislators and policy makers; advocacy and awareness raising with agencies and funders around the country;
    - Press contributions – interviews, quotes, and article writing; and
    - Supervision the NAO coordinator and NAO Youth advisor
  - 5) Communications and media coordination: **(\$15,000 annually)**
    - External advocacy, outreach, communications to develop momentum for this important initiative and plant the seeds both locally and nationally.
-