

# FOCUS

Newsletter of the Foster Family-based Treatment Association



## Using a Digital Platform to Provide Vital Resources for Youth in Foster Care —by Beverly Johnson, LCSW



**INSIDE THIS ISSUE**

**A FOCUS on Technology\***

\*Articles will become available to non-members on a biweekly basis

Access to technology that many of us take for granted has long been a barrier for many youth in foster care, but in recent years this situation has changed thanks to the innovative ideas of individuals working with youth in foster care and of former youth in care themselves. One woman whose passion has been to close the digital divide for these youth, their caregivers, and the agencies that serve them is Serita Cox, Executive Director of iFoster (ifoster.org), herself a former youth in foster care. She started with one bold idea: to transform the child welfare system with an online platform that connects at-risk children and teens in foster care across the country to the resources they need to become successful, independent adults. iFoster virtually connects transitional age youth in foster care to important resources and provides them with a

"digital locker" that about 5,000 youth in foster care across the country are currently using to hold important life documents such as birth certificates and transcripts. Ms. Cox graciously provided the following answers to our questions.

### Why are you so passionate about this program?

Many children and youth in foster care face some of the worst outcomes—46% will drop out of school, 50% will be unemployed, 70% will receive government assistance, and 25% will be incarcerated. These at-risk youth are my sisters and brothers. With the right support, however, I became a vice president at a Fortune 500 tech company and have spent three years at a nonprofit strategy consulting firm, specializing in child welfare. iFoster targets the major barriers at-risk youth in foster care face: the high

cost of living, the digital divide, poor health habits, academic failure, and unemployment. Using technology to aggregate a community of millions, iFoster attracts private and public resources to empower the agencies and caregivers in these systems to change these children's lives forever.

### How long has iFoster been operating?

iFoster launched in October of 2010. Since then, it has become one of the largest and most inclusive online communities in child welfare, helping to raise over 2 million children and youth in all 50 states. iFoster has earned some prestigious recognition, including Citizen Innovator, The White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, Echoing Green Fellowship (2012), America's Leader of Change,

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# EDITOR'S COLUMN

—by Gretchen Test, MSW

*“Technology is nothing. What’s important is that you have a faith in people, that they’re basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they’ll do wonderful things with them.” —Steve Jobs*

Over the last few years the field of child welfare has truly begun to benefit from many “good and smart people” who are combining their passion for children and families with their tech smarts. In this issue we highlight some well-established approaches and share some emerging tools. In fact, several of those good and smart people are former youth in foster care or foster and adoptive parents.

We continue highlighting FFTA’s policy advocacy work in Laura Boyd’s “What’s Up in Public Policy,” with news on the status of the federal Family First Act and developing efforts to create a federal definition of treatment foster care, which could have a huge impact on FFTA member agencies and the children they serve. Nebraska and Maine FFTA chapters both report on their efforts to strengthen membership and focus on foster family recruitment, recruitment, recruitment!

“Using a Digital Platform to Provide Vital Resources for Youth in Foster Care,” the first article in this technology themed issue, describes the services of ifoster.org, one of the largest online communities helping youth in foster care, their caregivers and support people, to find resources (like laptops!), store documents, and share information. It was created by Serita Cox, a former youth in foster care.

Are you wondering what’s next on the child welfare-technology frontier? “Alumni Perspectives: The Role of Technology in the Future” highlights three rising stars who happen to be alumni of foster care, who are combining their drive to improve foster care with their leadership and technological skills, developing three new tools to serve our community. The future is bright!

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## Using a Digital Platform to Provide Vital Resources for Youth in Foster Care

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National Urban Fellows (2012); and “1 Laptop per Youth in Foster Care,” recognized by Microsoft as one of the best Microsoft Refurbisher Programs globally (2012–2013).

### Why are you doing this?

iFoster’s goal is to give children and youth in foster care the same resources and opportunities that biological children receive. We are addressing this by bringing the highly fragmented foster care community together with needed resources. iFoster is of the community for the community. Everyone at iFoster has ties to child welfare and as a result cares deeply about improving the lives of the children and youth who, through no fault of their own, live outside their biological homes due to abuse, violence, or neglect. We believe in the power of community and are aggregating a highly fragmented system into one powerful group that will transform child welfare. We’re starting with the most pressing needs, getting our community members the resources they need and closing the funding gap. But our goal is much higher. By building a strong, supportive, inclusive community, we believe we can raise a collective voice to force change—change in the public perception of children in care and change in the system. It is only when every child has the opportunity and the tools to become a successful, independent adult and reach her or his full potential that iFoster will meet its goal.

Think of iFoster as a benefits program for foster care. We want to make life a little easier by providing some of the resources and tools that you might struggle to find for your clients. Rather than each of you spending your time finding resources, we want to do it on your behalf. Why? First, because it’s so much easier when one organization works on behalf of everyone, and businesses only need to work with one partner. Second, because that’s what we know how to do, and we’ve built an incredibly scalable and reliable portal across which to do this. Third, because we come from child welfare, and this is what we want to do to help the next generation of children and youth growing up in the system.

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## Editor's Column

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Are you concerned about how to help young people simultaneously use social media and stay safe online? Praesidium's "Managing Social Media Risks Within Foster Care Agencies" offers practical guidelines.

Interested in creating an online community as part of your efforts to support foster parents, but hesitate because you're worried about privacy or online abuse? "Utilizing Social Media to Engage and Connect Foster/Adoptive Families" describes how one agency overcame those worries to create Right Turn's Facebook group, now a thriving community of over 160 members. The article is co-authored by an adoptive parent.

Are you looking for help finding computers and cell phones or increase digital access for the children and families you serve? Check out the Resource List to see who you can contact in your state.

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*Gretchen Test, MSW, is a Senior Associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, located in Baltimore, MD. She serves on the FFTA Board of Directors and is the Chair of the Editorial Committee.*

### iFoster has distributed laptops to 7,803 Youth in Foster Care across 48 states

#### Evaluation Report Covers

- 3,063 Youth in Foster Care given laptops across 4 counties

#### Placer County (high school)

- 300 received a laptop

#### Madera and Fresno Counties (age middle and high school)

- 212 received a laptop

#### Los Angeles County (college-bound and in college)

- 2,551 received a laptop

## Using a Digital Platform to Provide Vital Resources for Youth in Foster Care

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### Describe what iFoster provides.

Hundreds of our organizational members use resources such as Power Reading, Career Cruising, School Kits, laptops, cell phones, and others in their programs. We negotiate free products and services as well as bulk discounts that we pass along to you. We provide transitional tools and job opportunities to youth in foster care such as our TAY (Transitional Age Youth) Assistant, which is an online personal assistant that helps youth manage their life.

They can store documents in a secure, data-encrypted locker, find resources, apply for programs, and keep track of it all so they are in control of what they need to get ahead.

Whether it is finding success in school, getting that first job, volunteering, or being a role model, iFoster wants to reward both children and youth. Youth can share their successes with iFoster directly through their digital locker, while caregivers and organizations can share accomplishments of the children and young people in their care through their caregiver or worker account. Every month, iFoster will reward and recognize achievements with congratulatory cards and gifts from our corporate partners.

Our newest program is building a pipeline to jobs in the \$620 billion grocery industry. With over 3.4 million jobs across retail, wholesale, supply chain, and manufacturing, the grocery industry is working with iFoster to provide opportunities for part-time and full-time jobs that come with benefits, scholarships, and tuition reimbursement for postsecondary education as well as career advancement. Starting in California, iFoster is actively seeking child welfare partnerships across the country to bring this program to your community. In our first year, the jobs program has 100 youth hires with 100% hire rate and 90% retention through 6 months.

### Is iFoster *really* free?

Yes! iFoster is a nonprofit with a mission of helping raise children who are living outside their biological homes. We've started with trying to close the funding gap by bringing free and discounted resources to the community from private, public, and government service providers across the country. iFoster is an online community offering resources, technology, tutoring, eye-glasses, job opportunities, and a digital locker for youth

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to secure personal information. iFoster is virtual and operates in all 50 states plus Guam and Puerto Rico.

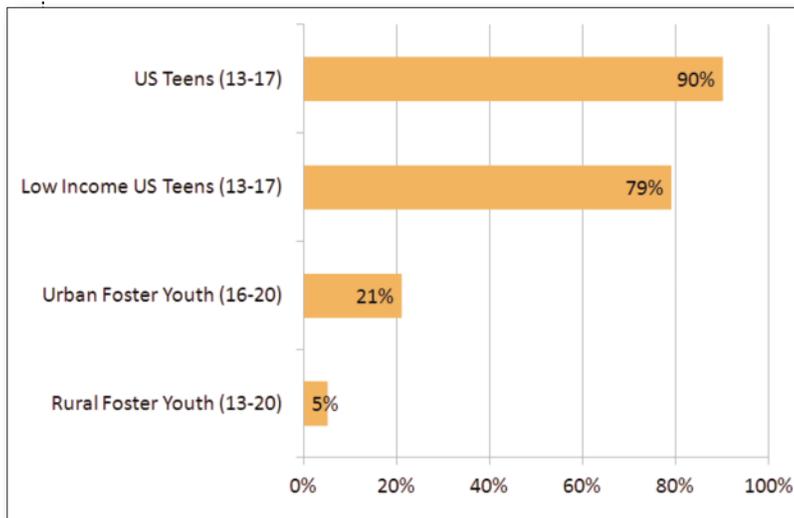
### Who qualifies to be an iFoster member?

We provide membership for free to:

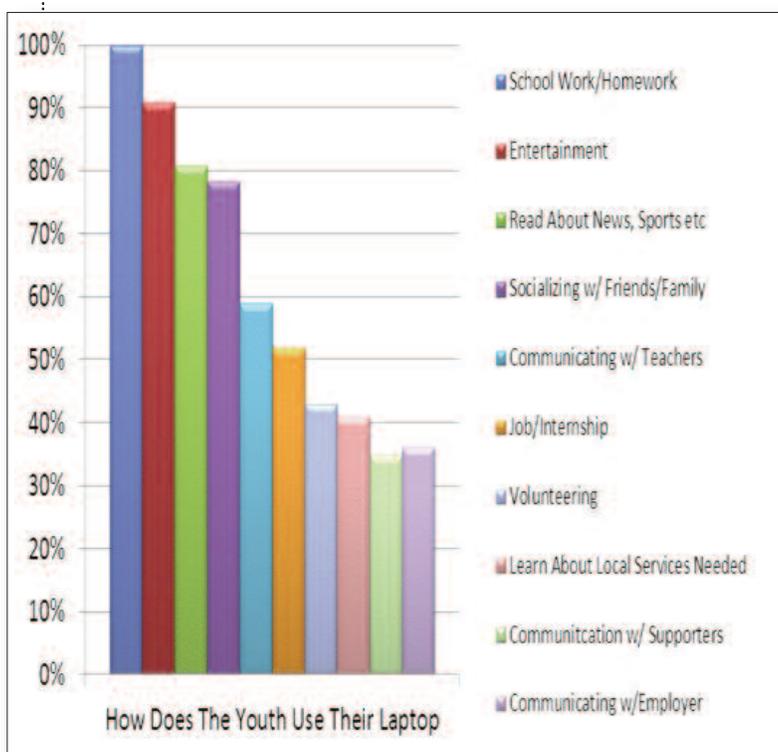
- Transitional age youth in foster care (ages 16 to 24)
- Families and caregivers (foster, kinship, relative, near-kin, legal guardian, adoptive)
- Case workers, social workers, attorneys, CASAs (court appointed special advocates), judges, and agency administrators
- Direct service organizations (i.e., group homes, transitional housing, FFAs [foster family agencies], ILPs [independent living programs])
- Other support organizations (i.e., CASAs, support/advocacy groups, associations, government agencies)

For more information, please go to [ifoster.org](http://ifoster.org), email us at [support@ifoster.org](mailto:support@ifoster.org), or contact us by phone at (855) 936-7837.

*Beverly Johnson, LCSW is the Chief Program Officer of Lilliput Children's Services. She is a member of the FFTA Board of Directors and serves as the vice chair of the FFTA Editorial Committee. She will be presenting on family-centered models at the FFTA 30th Annual Conference. She will also present at the Pre-Conference Institute: The FFTA Kinship Treatment Foster Care Initiative: Lessons Learned and Future Directions.*



Graph 1: Access to a Computer in the Home *Graph submitted by iFoster*



Graph 2: iFoster Survey Respondents: How Youth Use their Laptops *Graph submitted by iFoster*

## FOCUS

Newsletter of the Foster Family-based Treatment Association

The Foster Family-based Treatment Association strengthens agencies that support families caring for vulnerable children.

### Get in FOCUS

FOCUS is the newsletter distributed to all Foster Family-based Treatment Association agency members. Articles of the newsletter are made available to the general public on a staggered basis.

To receive the full FOCUS, consider joining FFTA.  
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