

Former foster youth serving on National Foster Youth and Alumni Policy Council

A former foster youth and participant in the Department of Human Service's Independent Living Initiative (ILI) is one of 20 youths nationwide who are serving on the National Foster Youth and Alumni Policy Council.

Nico'Lee Rohac recently returned from meeting with other members of the council and Rafael Lopez, U.S. Commissioner of the Administration of Children, Youth and Families. Also attending the meeting was Chereese Phillips, Diversity Officer with the DHS Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF), who is co-administrator of the council.

Nico'lee said meeting Commissioner Lopez was an invaluable experience and fit her desire to bring the needs of former foster youth to policymakers.

**May is
National
Foster Care
Month**

"He hears what we have to say,"

Nico'Lee said of her meeting. "The commissioner was very honest with us and very approachable. I really respect that he was willing to acknowledge that there are some areas that need to be improved in our child welfare system on a national level."

The council also met with policymakers from the American Association of Pediatrics, and representatives of the nonprofits Youth Villages, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and the National Association for Education of Homeless Children and Youth. Topics discussed included reducing barriers to public and private housing for former foster youth; savings programs; congregant care, specifically needs for LGBTQ youth; and rights related to birth control.

Nico'Lee was supported in part by ILI while attending Washington & Jefferson College, where she earned a degree in psychology. She interned with ILI and the Allegheny Link and received her Master's in social work from the University of Pittsburgh in 2014. She currently is an outpatient therapist for Three Rivers Adoption Council. Her participation in the National Foster Youth and Alumni Council came about during



Above, Nico'Lee, right, and Chereese at a meeting of the National Foster Youth and Alumni Council. **Left,** Nico'Lee with Rafael Lopez, U.S. Commissioner of the Administration of Children, Youth and Families.



and impromptu visit with JoAnn Hannah, ILLI Manager. She expressed to JoAnn that she wanted to be an advocate for foster youth. JoAnn knew that Chereese had been seeking to nominate someone from Allegheny County, and so she recommended Nico'Lee.

Nico'Lee will serve 18 months on the council, which meets via phone conference and in person every six months. She is excited to be able to tap her knowledge base to help foster youth. Council members are not lobbyists but they do get to meet with those who develop policy and inform them as they do their work. "I am in a position to use my voice," she said, adding that she is particularly keen to ensure that foster youth know what supports and opportunities exist for them. "If you haven't gone through the foster care system, it's hard to understand. I've met a lot of really great people in being on the foster council."

The [National Foster Youth & Alumni Policy Council](#), in partnership with Foster Care Alumni of America and FosterClub, is supported by Casey Family Programs. Advisory organizations include the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, Foster Care to Success, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and Foster Youth In Action.