

Listening to *Youth Voices*

Since 2012, the Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE) has conducted a series of surveys to gather feedback from Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) youth living in out-of-home placements. This year, DARE is implementing new methods to improve survey design.

“We have conducted *Youth Voices* surveys three times over the last five years, but have always noticed a very low response rate of 15-20%,” said Mike Mitchell, manager of client experience analytics in DARE. “We felt it was important to examine our approach and find opportunities to make the surveys more appealing to youth.”

Working with SITY (Systems Improvement Through Youth), the 412 Youth Zone, Youth Support Partners (YSPs), and other youth-serving organizations, the *Youth Voices* workgroup conducted focus groups and outreach to gain input from youth about survey design. The workgroup found that youth were overwhelmed by previous surveys that were up to 10 pages in length. Additionally, youth felt that past survey designs were boring and not engaging.

To that end, the *Youth Voices* workgroup kept its next survey concise, featured bright colors and used a series of smiley icons to depict youth’s satisfaction in each area: green smiley for a positive response, red frowning face for a negative response and a yellow neutral face for neutral responses. Additionally, staff increased their presence, encouraging participants to complete the survey, answering any questions and reinforcing the importance of youth sharing their thoughts to have an impact on future services. The surveys were delivered by hand and through postal mail, while also available online. With these changes, the most recent survey received a 53% response rate, a dramatic improvement.

“Throughout this process, we’ve learned the importance of using a bottom-up approach and allowing the feedback of our target audience to guide our decision-making,” said Mike. “We will continue to explore new ways that we can continue to engage youth and improve the survey process.”