

## CTG Online News

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### Empowering Youth Voices: Engaging Youth in Foster Care through the NYTD Peer Caller Program

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The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and Stony Brook University, in partnership with the Center for Technology in Government (CTG), are leading the implementation of New York's National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). NYTD is a federal mandate requiring states to survey certain youth at ages 17, 19 and 21 about the services they receive and track their progress once they leave foster care. The goal of NYTD is to improve transition services for foster care youth in New York State.

Early in the NYTD implementation, CTG relied on its professional staff for creating NYTD branding, mailings, phone calls, emails, and social media to stay in touch with youth leaving foster care. This strategy helped to launch the NYTD program, but one crucial aspect was missing: the direct input of youth in foster care. To address this, CTG created an innovative Peer Caller Program to establish a direct connection between NYTD youth and their peers.

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The Peer Caller Program trains participating UAlbany students and OCFS student assistants in how to help keep foster care youth engaged in the NYTD program through consistent outreach and relationship building. Peer callers undergo a detailed training in cultural awareness, crisis management, confidentiality considerations, and basic communication skills to prepare them for making phone calls to NYTD identified youth. This consistent engagement not only better informs the NYTD data collection, but it also provides a point of communication for youth who have left foster care. Peer callers interact with NYTD youth every three to six months to stay in touch, build a trusting relationship, and emphasize to these youth that their voice can make a difference in the future of independent living services.

By engaging current foster care youth through the Peer Caller Program, CTG saw how NYTD was becoming more efficient, effective, and sustainable. The UAlbany students who have participated in the program have provided insight from a variety of personal and educational backgrounds - from sociology to computer science and from music to media and communications. Peer Callers help NYTD youth leaving foster care to feel a deeper connection with their community and with other youth their age.

Since the inception of the Peer Caller Program, CTG has seen a positive improvement in the number of youth who stay in touch with NYTD. This past summer peer callers made more than 150 NYTD connections with eligible youth, providing a unique opportunity to inform foster care policy and practice with direct feedback from the youth receiving services. Through the Peer Caller Program, UAlbany students are helping to make a difference in the future of foster care by building relationships between government programs and the people they serve.