

# A BETTER HEART GALLERY

Recommendations Developed by Youth





# ABOUT VOICES

**V**oice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES), a nonprofit dedicated to supporting and empowering foster youth in their transition to independence, was founded in Napa County in 2005 as a one-stop community and resource center. Since then, the VOICES model has been replicated in multiple counties in California that are home to an immense population of underserved young people.

VOICES is committed to authentic youth engagement and providing youth with the support necessary for achieving successful outcomes. VOICES utilizes an innovative youth engagement model focused on empowering each youth, integrating resources and services, and working with the entire community to address the barriers youth face as they leave the various systems of care. Young people of VOICES are not only recipients of social services, they are active leaders in supporting their peers, guiding the evolving vision of program delivery and conducting trainings to enable social service agencies to become "youth-friendly." They advocate for the community at large to listen and respond to the concerns and ideas shared by young people. As a youth-led organization providing empowering leadership opportunities, VOICES has reached out to, and engaged with, thousands of young people and continues to do so.





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# Introduction

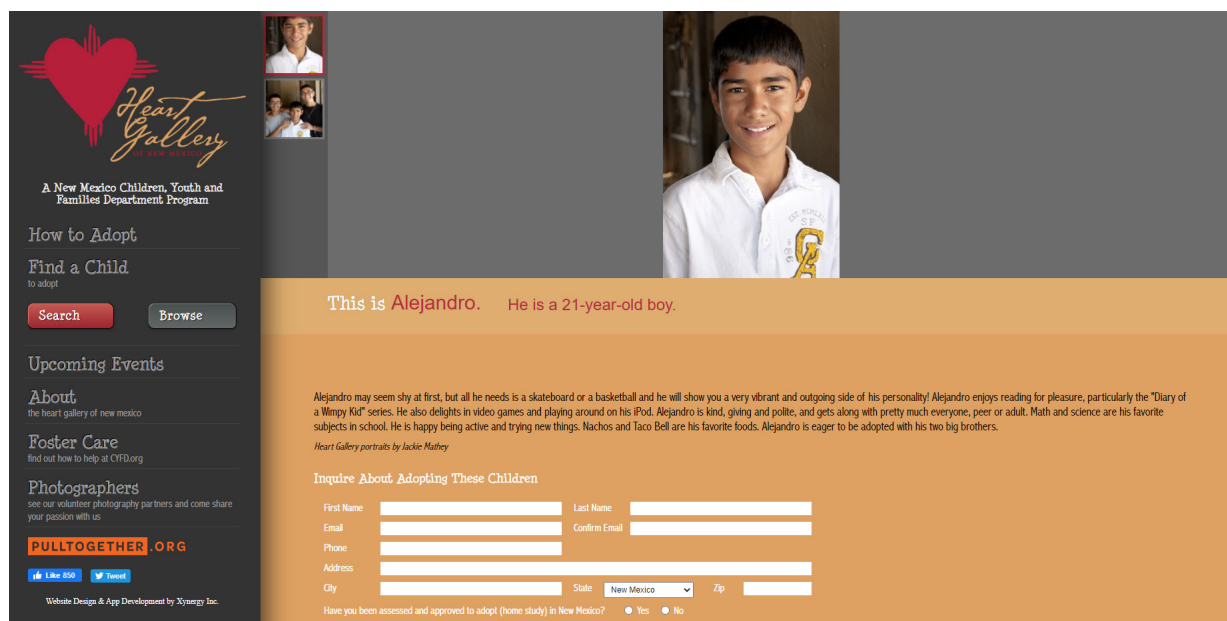
**F**ounded in 2001 by the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD), the Heart Gallery photography exhibit was created to find forever families for children in foster care in New Mexico. With many children becoming available for adoption each year, the aim of the gallery is to increase the number of adoptive families for children needing homes. This is done through the engaging potential adoptive families in adoption events where they can meet children and youth who are up for adoption as well as visiting the Heart Gallery website, [heartgallerynm.org](http://heartgallerynm.org), to view portraits and biographies of young people waiting to find their forever families.

Since its inception, the Heart Gallery has garnered remarkable media attention and has expanded to 41 other states. Now 20 years later, New Mexico's Children, Youth and Families Department has made the decision to engage in an effort to enhance the Heart Gallery with the support of young people throughout the state. In early 2021, focus groups were conducted via video and teleconferencing with New Mexico foster youth between the ages of 16-24 to gather feedback about their experiences with and impressions of the Heart Gallery. Participants shared their recommendations for improving the Heart Gallery to better support youth during the adoption process. This report reflects the ideas of subject matter experts, young people, in the state of New Mexico with lived experiences in the child welfare system.



**“When New Mexico’s Heart Gallery launched the first Heart Gallery, it was cutting edge and even featured on Oprah. In the following years, the Heart Gallery concept has been repeated by many states, but technology and the way we communicate has changed over time. We know that youth are the experts in their own lives and we hope heavy youth input will create an updated Heart Gallery that best serves and protects young people.”**

**— CHARLIE MOORE-PABST, CYFD**





# Challenges

**C**onducting a youth-led data and information gathering process proved to be a challenge due to a number of factors. Historical tension between CYFD and partnering organizations resulted in a delay in their agreeing to share the opportunity to participate in the scheduled focus groups with young people that were connected to the organizations.

Another predominant factor in the struggles of this project can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth respond and attend in-person events more often than virtual events when incentives and an ideal location are provided. Had it not been for the pandemic, focus groups would have been held in locations that best suited the participants (i.e. transitional housing, CYFD offices, organizational spaces) making it easier and more enticing for them to attend.

Working with Youth Leaders from LUVYA and NMCAN yielded positive outcomes such as united leadership, facilitation, and engagement. However, the primary goal behind hiring the Youth Leaders was not met, again influenced by the pandemic. Youth Leaders were hired to gather young people with experience in the adoption process, more specifically the Heart Gallery, in order for them to share their thoughts and ideas for how to improve the Heart Gallery during focus groups. Focus group participants were compensated for their time, focus groups were held at what Youth Leaders considered reasonable hours for people ages 16-24, and participants did not need to travel to attend because focus groups were held virtually as a result of the pandemic. With these and other incentives in place, and Youth Leaders using their networks to share the opportunity to join the scheduled focus groups, they struggled to find participants since they could not do in-person outreach.

In addition, there is a small number of older youth with Heart Gallery experience and, as noted above, many youth have a misunderstanding about the difference between the Heart Gallery Foundation compared to the Heart Gallery for adoption. While we were unable to engage the targeted number of 100 youth, the young people who participated in focus groups shared valuable experiences and provided key ideas on how to make the Heart Gallery even better.

# Process

**Y**outh between the ages of 16-24 across the state of New Mexico were engaged through VOICES' Heart Gallery focus groups. The focus groups were designed and conducted following VOICES' authentic youth-led model to ensure participants felt heard and respected while maintaining confidentiality and circumventing the opportunity for tokenization.


During these focus groups, participants were asked about their experiences with the Heart Gallery adoption process and if they would provide feedback on what is working well and what could be improved upon to better serve young people involved in the process. Policy recommendations were then developed to address the ideas and concerns shared by participants which were further strengthened by future focus group participants who reiterated similar experiences, ideas, and concerns. VOICES reviewed the focus group input and identified overarching themes regarding website remodeling, youth input, policies and procedures, and outreach and education.



# Recommendations

## WEBSITE REMODEL

- ✓ Youth recommended that the Heart Gallery website be updated with a more “welcoming” look by involving young people in the revision process. Youth suggested that advocates through NMCAN, LUVYA, and CYFD could support this process annually or biannually to keep the site’s look current and welcoming to youth. This would also provide youth the opportunity to gain skills in technical design and work experience as they would be compensated for their efforts. Compensation rates will be no lower than the living wage that is established in each jurisdiction.
- ✓ While youth felt that the “Our Terrific Teens” tab on the page of each teen’s profile could be useful to adoptive parents who do not have a preference about the age of a child whom they wish to adopt, the youth felt the tab was discriminatory to teens as it informs the viewer that “special support” is available to those who adopt teens, the only population presented with additional information as if to show they were still adoptable despite their complex needs. Youth felt teens were penalized for being their age and having different needs than children of other ages. Participants recommended that informational tabs be added to other age ranges and youth with special needs so one group is not singled out. Youth Leaders will be responsible for developing a template for what to include in other age ranges and youth with special needs.
- ✓ Youth noted that the Heart Gallery biographies were repetitive and some seemed biased. Some biographies were longer than others and more cautionary information was provided for select youth. Participants recommended that the biographies capture and highlight the reality of who the youth are behind the profile and minimize the misconceptions potential adoptive parents may develop about a young person based on their biography. Youth should be given the opportunity to write their own biographies with the support of a social worker or other personnel so they can share what is important to them for potential adoptive parents to know. Youth Leaders will develop updated

  
**Heart Gallery of New Mexico**  
 Children, Youth and Families Department  
 Portrait Application

First Name of Child/Youth	Last Name of Child/Youth	DOB of Child/Youth

**Photographer Selected (please refer to the attached document):**

First Name/Last Name	Geographic Location	Phone Number/email
n/a		

**Date of Portrait Appointment:** n/a

**Adoption Consultant's Name & Region:** n/a

**Siblings' Full Names: (if applicable and being placed together.)** n/a

**Once completed, please email this form to:**

Juliet Martinez  
 Prevention, Placement and Adoption  
 Resources Bureau  
[juliet.martinez@state.nm.us](mailto:juliet.martinez@state.nm.us)  
 Phone: (505) 827-8439

***If the session needs to be canceled or re-scheduled, please update Juliet immediately and provide alternative dates/times. It is very important to communicate effectively with our photographer volunteers who graciously provide services for us.***

**Photographer Instructions:**  
 All photographs taken at this photography session must be sent by the photographer to the CYFD Heart Gallery of New Mexico. Photographs may be uploaded (free of charge) via [WeTransfer.com](https://www.wetransfer.com) to: [Sylvia.sweeney@state.nm.us](mailto:Sylvia.sweeney@state.nm.us)

In addition, an invitation may be emailed to the photographer to access **Drop Box**. Please have the photographer request the Drop Box invitation from [Sylvia.sweeney@state.nm.us](mailto:Sylvia.sweeney@state.nm.us) with a cc to [desiree.turner@state.nm.us](mailto:desiree.turner@state.nm.us)

***Please understand, portraits are never to be delivered to anyone other than the Heart Gallery of NM. This includes the child/youth, foster family, or CYFD staff.***

Heart Gallery of NM - Portrait Application 2020 Page

biography templates for young people to use as a means of expressing who they are.

- ✓ Youth noted photographs posted on the Heart Gallery varied greatly in quality and quantity. The professional photography by voluntary photographers did not seem like a genuine representation of youth as pictures in profiles appeared to be too staged. The photographs taken by social workers or anyone other than a professional photographer were off-putting to focus group participants, who noted that these pictures could deter potential adoptive parents from inquiring about a youth. Focus group participants recommended that pictures and videos be taken of youth participating in activities they enjoy and in natural environments they are comfortable in. This recommendation may also reduce the need for in-person adoption recruitment events as potential adoptive families would view a genuine outlook on how a young person behaves and what they enjoy.



## POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

- ✓ Participants expressed concerns about adoptable children and youth being displayed on the Heart Gallery when “on hold,” meaning CYFD cannot take inquiries about a young person yet their picture and biography are still available for viewing. Youth identified this as a safety concern and a potential for miscommunication and loss of interest in adopting a child if prospective adoptive parents are unable to submit an inquiry. Their recommendation is to remove a young person’s profile from the Heart Gallery once they are “on hold” in order to protect the youth from unwanted viewers like relatives or others and to avoid a misunderstanding among potential adoptive families who are interested in submitting an inquiry.

## OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

- ✓ Young people listed barriers to their own adoption processes, including misinformation which adoptive parents, resource parents, and the youth themselves had about requirements; lengthy court processes that led to one or multiple parties dropping out of the adoption process; and lack of knowledge and opportunity to participate in the adoption process through the Heart Gallery. Participants also expressed the importance of transparency for all parties involved in the adoption. CYFD is recommended to administer a standardized training program to all protective services staff regarding the adoption process and requirements for all parties involved. Youth Leaders are responsible for developing the training program and will design outreach material for the training program.
- ✓ Though the Heart Gallery is well known now through its widespread media coverage, those who could benefit from it the most are often unaware of what it is and how it can impact them. Participants

**“There are a few kids I knew in the homes I lived in who were put up for adoption, but had requirements they had to go through to get adopted. So a lot of them didn’t get adopted and ended up feeling a certain way. These are things I have experienced myself and watched other kids experience as well.”**

**—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**“It’s not really an option for youth in general. My brother was adopted, and that option was not given to him. The NM HG has a certain set of criteria you have to meet, and I was seeing that on the website as well. When you look on the website, their age ranges are a lot younger, underneath 10 years of age. I’m not sure if they give the HG as an option to youth through CYFD.”**

**—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT**

recommended that permanency planning workers be required to share the option of adoption to all youth in the foster care system including through the Heart Gallery. When discussing their own adoption experiences, participants stated they would have benefited significantly from being a part of the Heart Gallery and would like to have known it was an option for adoption support. Young people recommended that youth be informed about the Heart Gallery when they enter the foster care system. Youth Leaders alongside CYFD Youth Advocates will be responsible for sharing information about the Heart Gallery with young people who enter the system.

- ✓ Many focus group participants understood the purpose of the Heart Gallery Foundation, yet they did not have a clear understanding of the Heart Gallery in regards to the adoption process. Many CYFD staff, on the other hand, understood the Heart Gallery adoption process but not the Heart Gallery Foundation. This noticeable gap in knowledge amongst youth involved in the child welfare system and those who worked in the department itself should be addressed through outreach and education. Young people involved in the foster care system should be notified of the opportunity to participate in the Heart Gallery adoption process by their social workers and others in their support team. This information should be provided to young people in a trauma informed and unbiased manner in order to give youth an opportunity to develop their own opinions on the adoption process and decide if it is a choice they wish to consider. For this to happen, protective services staff should receive trauma-informed training in order to provide unbiased information in a supportive manner to young people who wish to learn more about the adoption process.

# Opportunities for Youth Leadership

**T**he recommendations listed above create an ideal opportunity for CYFD to think about how to best incorporate authentic youth engagement and the opportunity for youth to take on leadership opportunities that will support their growth and healthy development. The tasks outlined are achievable for both Youth Leaders and the Youth Advocates employed by CYFD, assuming the proper levels of adult support are provided. The Youth Advocates can not only take on overall coordination of implementing the above recommendations, the following list specific roles/tasks that should be led/completed by CYFD Youth Advocates:

- ✓ Enable Youth Advocates to create design ideas for the Heart Gallery website to achieve a “welcoming” look. Ensure they have the tools and resources available to learn website design and partner them with an expert that can implement their vision.
- ✓ Permit and resource Youth Advocates to develop a template for what to include in each section of the website to ensure that the “Terrific Teens” are not singled out. Once developed, the Heart Gallery should adopt and utilize the template.
- ✓ Allow Youth Advocates to develop updated biography templates for the website.
- ✓ Empower Youth Advocates to act as “Staff Photographers” for the website.
- ✓ Grant Youth Advocates the authority needed to ensure accountability on the part of CYFD to update the “on hold” youth.
- ✓ Actively engage Youth Advocates in both developing and providing the Heart Gallery training program for CYFD staff and partners. Additionally, allow Youth Advocates to design outreach material for the training program.
- ✓ Support Youth Advocates in developing a comprehensive outreach campaign to ensure all young people engaged with the child welfare system are familiar with both the existence and purpose of the Heart Gallery.





# Looking Ahead

**C**YFD is committed to ensuring the Heart Gallery is youth-driven and trauma responsive by listening to youth perspectives provided in this report. Additionally, CYFD has expressed interest in the creation of a Youth Advisory Board to both follow-up on the recommendations put forth as well as add an essential perspective to ongoing conversations happening within CYFD.

In the coming months, young people who participated as youth leaders and subject matter experts in this process of improving the Heart Gallery should have the opportunity to continue their advocacy through a Youth Advisory Board (YAB). This Advisory Board should work in partnership with the Communications Team and Youth Advocates at CYFD under the supervision of a CYFD staff that has extensive experience promoting authentic youth engagement in a trauma-informed way. The hiring process for the YAB Supervisor should be conducted with the inclusion of young people currently or formerly involved in the foster care system and should include the support of CYFD Youth Advocates, LUVYA members, and NMCAN youth if possible. CYFD Youth Advocates will take on recommendations of the YAB in an effort to implement recommendations at a department level. Youth on the Board will be compensated at no lower than the living wage that is established in each jurisdiction.

The Board should focus on creating a space to share their experiences as well as those of other young people who are currently or formerly in the foster care system. The YAB needs the support of other entities and stakeholders advocating for foster youth which means the Board will need to review membership of existing boards, commissions and other advisory entities including CCIC, JJAC, Children's Trust Fund, and NextGen Council to ensure there is authentic youth engagement and representation amongst these entities. Part of this process includes designating a Youth Advisory Board Member position amongst each existing board, commission, and other advisory entity involved in the efforts to support older youth in order for members to share about their current efforts, bring authentic youth engagement to the forefront of meetings, and

ensure the voices of young people are being shared and heard while circumventing the opportunity for tokenization. Once established, the Board will also manage advocacy efforts to encourage other Heart Galleries around the country to improve their processes to better support youth involved in the adoption process by replicating New Mexico's updated model.

Positive change in the foster care system only happens when those who experienced foster care are involved in the process. CYFD must conduct authentic, effective, ongoing engagement of youth to address the recommendations they have created and future policy changes. Immediately implementing these recommendations gives CYFD an opportunity to develop accountability and oversight to the Board in a timely fashion. CYFD is recommended to promote the participation of young people currently and formerly in foster care in the improvement and development of foster care and child welfare policy. The Youth Advisory Board is recommended to be contracted to work with the department to provide expertise and technical assistance to current and former foster youth as stated and structured in California legislation AB 2876 (Aroner).<sup>1</sup> Full commitment to serving the youth of New Mexico will increase the success rates of the recommendations and future investments involving young people.

It is our hope that the State of New Mexico's Children Youth and Families Department will listen to and respect the recommendations provided by youth in this report and will work diligently to ensure youth are provided the supports and opportunities needed to become healthy and vibrant adults.

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<sup>1</sup> "California Legislative Information - Bill Text - AB 2876 (Aroner)," Bill Text - AB-2876 Health and welfare programs. (California Legislature, July 10, 2000), [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=199920000AB2876](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=199920000AB2876).



For more information please visit:  
[www.voicesyouthcenter.org](http://www.voicesyouthcenter.org)