

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE 2026 FYI PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Since 2003, the program has provided individuals who have experienced the U.S. foster care system the opportunity to intern in a congressional office on Capitol Hill and publish a federal policy report on ways the United States can reform the foster care system. Meet the talented 2026 cohort of the Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program®.



Fia Ewers (NV)

Fia Ewers is a licensed Master of Social Work and advocate with lived experience, having earned both her Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work degrees from the University of Nevada, Reno. Throughout her professional career, Fia has dedicated her efforts to child welfare advocacy. She previously served as the Peer and Community Educator for the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) Fostering Success Initiative, supporting all seven Nevada degree-granting institutions. In this role, she co-planned and co-facilitated multiple statewide retreats, presented at conferences focused on foster youth success, and authored guides addressing barriers to higher education. Additionally, Fia participated in the National Foster Youth Institute's (NFYI) Congressional Leadership Academy as a Nevada delegate, where she strengthened her skills in national advocacy by shadowing Congresswoman Gwen Moore. Driven by both her professional expertise and lived experience, Fia is committed to advancing educational equity and shaping policies and systems that better support students with foster care experience.

LinkedIn:



Lily Ford (RI)

Lily Ford is a senior at the University of Rhode Island pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in political science and criminology, where she maintains a 3.93 GPA. She began advocating for child welfare reform at age sixteen and has since spent over four years working at the state, regional, and national levels to improve outcomes for youth in foster care. Some of Lily's key accomplishments include testifying at the Rhode Island State House, leading the state's Transition Subcommittee, and organizing Rhode Island's first Youth Summit. Her work also includes advocating for policy initiatives that support youth independence, such as expanding access to funded driving lessons and reinstating the Teen Grant. Most recently, Lily is working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to support the implementation of the SOUL Family Permanency option in Rhode Island. Above all, Lily is driven by the belief that the child welfare system should leave every young person feeling connected, prepared, and valued, and she is committed to helping create a system that truly supports youth as they transition into adulthood.

LinkedIn:





Miles Marquez (CA)

Miles Marquez is a former foster youth and current dual-enrollment nursing student at Golden West College and California State University, Fullerton in Orange County, California. He previously earned an Associate of Science in natural science from Orange Coast College. In addition to his studies, Miles works as a licensed Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and serves as an Emergency Department Technician in a Level 1 pediatric trauma emergency room in Orange County, California. Miles's commitment to advocacy began in high school, where he participated in Youth and Government, Associated Student Body (ASB), and served as a Link Crew Captain, mentoring new students. As he transitioned to college, Miles continued his advocacy efforts by leading several initiatives during a nursing study-abroad internship program in Arusha, Tanzania, where he conducted workshops addressing community health issues. Building on these experiences, Miles served as Mentorship Director at his nursing school, supporting and guiding incoming nursing students, where he will now continue this work as Vice President of the California Student Nursing Association club. His work as an EMT further fuels his passion for advocating on behalf of vulnerable patients and strengthening equitable access to care.

LinkedIn:



Serenity Miller (TX)

Serenity Miller is a driven undergraduate student at the University of North Florida (UNF), pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in political science and Spanish. Serenity's commitment to language and global engagement led her to earn a Certification in Spanish as a Foreign Language from the University of Burgos in Spain. Passionate about advocacy and youth empowerment, Serenity serves as the Legislative Chair for Florida Youth SHINE, a statewide nonprofit focused on improving outcomes for youth in foster care. In this role, she collaborates with organizational leadership to shape legislative priorities, trains constituents on policy updates, and amplifies community concerns across Florida. On campus, Serenity is an active leader. She is the Vice Chair of the Student Athletic Advisory Committee, representing student-athletes and fostering community engagement. As a Senator in Student Government, she champions student initiatives and campus programming. Beyond UNF, Serenity is the President of the Jacksonville Chapter of Fostering Connections, where she creates enriching opportunities for foster youth in her local community. With a strong foundation in public service, cross-cultural communication, and legislative advocacy, Serenity Miller is poised to make a lasting impact in law, policy, and youth development.

LinkedIn:





Alexia Nechayev (FL)

Alexia Nechayev has earned a Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Florida International University and is a dedicated advocate for youth with lived experience in foster care and homelessness. Originally from Miami, Florida, she entered foster care at a young age and experienced firsthand the stigma and systemic barriers facing youth in care, particularly the lack of support for self-advocacy. These experiences shaped her commitment to ensuring that others have access to the tools, resources, and protections she once lacked. Following her graduation, Alexia worked with the Florida Department of Children and Families as a Hope Navigator II, assisting clients through individualized care plans and deepening her dedication to serving marginalized youth. She has also contributed to statewide policy efforts that aided in the formulation and passing of several child welfare laws for the betterment of foster youth and homeless youth in the state of Florida. Currently, Alexia serves as an Independent Living Consultant with the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, a role created to support her work at the intersection of policy, legislation, and youth advocacy. In this position, she collaborates closely with attorneys, youth, and community partners, and she is scheduled to engage in legislative advocacy at the Florida State Capitol in the coming year. Alexia has recently been accepted to the University of Michigan Law School and plans to attend next fall to pursue a legal career focused on public interest, policy, and advocacy.

LinkedIn:



Layla Nytes (MS)

Layla Nytes is a current junior at Jackson State University working towards a Bachelor of Arts in political science with a concentration in legal studies. Layla has aspirations of pursuing a career in law and public policy focused on child welfare reform and youth advocacy. As a former foster youth, her academic and professional goals are deeply shaped by her lived experience within the child welfare system. Layla currently serves as Vice Chair of Mississippi Youth Voice, a statewide organization composed of current and former foster youth advocating for foster care reform in Mississippi. In this role, she works alongside other young leaders to elevate youth voices, inform policy discussions, and promote systemic change. Layla is also a Jim Casey Fellow through the Annie E. Casey Foundation, where she engages in leadership development and advocacy efforts focused on improving outcomes for young people impacted by foster care. Layla has held various positions at the Mississippi State Capitol, which have provided her with firsthand exposure to legislative processes, public service, and policy development. Through her coursework, internships, and advocacy work, Layla is committed to advancing equitable, youth-centered policies and contributing to systems that better support children and families.

LinkedIn:





Alexander Robinson (OR)

Alexander Robinson is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Science in psychology at Portland State University, with an academic focus on trauma-informed policy, youth equity, and systemic reform. He is a former foster youth and advocate with over five years of lived experience in Oregon's foster care system. During and after his time in care, Alexander became deeply engaged in efforts to improve outcomes for foster youth by ensuring their voices are meaningfully represented in policy and decision-making spaces. He currently serves on the Oregon Youth Advisory Council under the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC), where he contributes lived experience and policy insight to initiatives focused on youth disconnection, educational access, and systems accountability. Alexander also serves as a member of the Board of Advisors for C3 Oregon, a private nonprofit organization focused on advancing equity and opportunity for youth. Through this role, he collaborates with educators, counselors, and community partners to address barriers facing foster-involved students and to translate youth perspectives into actionable recommendations. In addition to his advocacy work, Alexander is a nationally certified Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and registered adult mental health peer support specialist, grounding his policy interests in frontline experience with crisis response and public systems.

LinkedIn:



Hana Ramirez Thomas (CA)

Hana Thomas is an emerging professional and dedicated student currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in psychology at the University of California, San Diego. A graduate of Ramona High School, she began her higher education at a local community college, where she earned her Associate of Arts before transferring to UC San Diego to continue advancing her academic and career goals. In addition to her studies, Hana works part-time as a child care worker supporting adolescent teenagers in the California child welfare system. As a proud Mexican American woman, Hana draws motivation from gratitude for the opportunities she has been afforded, and, inspired by her father's sacrifices to immigrate to the United States, she is determined to honor his perseverance through her own academic achievement and professional success.

LinkedIn:





Shalise Truxler (IN)

Shalise Truxler is a current junior at Ball State University pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in social work with a minor in public and nonprofit administration. She is deeply interested in advocacy, policy, legislation, and program development, with the goal of earning a master's degree in social work and pursuing a macro-level career in policy that supports foster youth and families. Shalise has served on youth-led boards, including the Indiana Foster Youth Alliance, and has advocated for foster youth at the Indiana Statehouse. She has also hosted community engagement events focused on bringing people together, raising awareness, and sharing resources. Her advocacy centers on strengthening systems that impact vulnerable populations and ensuring youth and families have a voice in the policies that affect their lives. She is passionate about raising the foundation—or standard of living—so that people are able to pursue happiness, self-actualization, and long-term goals that are often made inaccessible by poverty. Outside of her academic and advocacy work, Shalise enjoys studying at libraries, reading fantasy novels, playing video games, wrestling with her three dogs, and refining her cooking skills. She also enjoys travel, meeting new people, and embracing community.

LinkedIn:



Aria Williams (NV)

Aria Williams is a child welfare professional and public speaker with extensive experience in child welfare, public speaking, and foster youth advocacy. She holds a Master of Public Administration and a Bachelor of Music in music performance, bringing both analytical and communication strengths to her work in the child welfare system. She regularly speaks in her community, advocating for older foster youth, and works directly with young people to help them find the lifelong supports they need. Aria is a member of the AdoptUSKids Speakers Bureau, where she has engaged in national advocacy and public speaking to elevate youth voices and lived experience in child welfare. She has spoken at a National Adoption Month event and is a recipient of an Adoption Excellence Award. Having spent eight years in foster care herself, Aria's work is informed by her lived experience, and she brings that perspective into her policy analysis, systems reform, and youth-centered advocacy.

LinkedIn:

