




The **Blast**
NEWSLETTER

Fall Edition 2023

Official newsletter of the
Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board

YAB

YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

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County Shoutouts!

Hey! Did you know there are local Youth Advisory Boards and 6 regional boards throughout the 67 counties in Pennsylvania? This means many positive things are happening within our communities. This month, we would like to give a shoutout to some of these counties:

Great job, **Cambria County**! Their local YAB participated in a community block party that promoted togetherness, stopping violence (Cure4Violence), and the hope for a better community (Hope4Johnstown). In addition, the youth set up horseshoe games and handed out beneficial Learning About Foster Care coloring books to the youth in their community. They have also collected soda can tabs to contribute to their Regional YAB Project to support the Ronald McDonald House.



Another shoutout goes to **Indiana County YAB**! They set up a table at the Community Family Fun Fest with free activities and resources for families. They even made colorful butterflies out of coffee filters and small Brazilian flags to represent the country of Brazil. Way to go, Indiana County, and good work to all the counties and their projects!



Niagara Falls

Being only 17 miles away from Buffalo, NY, the Erie County ILP was able to take a fantastic trip out to Niagara Falls. Every year, the Erie ILP promotes helping their youth explore places by taking trips to Baltimore for a week or to New York City. Erie county ILP wants youth to learn life skills such as independence and achieving their goals. These trips are both educational and fun.



College Experience

By Robin Braum, YAB Youth Ambassador

I'm currently a sophomore at Gannon University, pursuing a degree in Criminal Justice. My college experience has been a journey of personal growth, focused on forming new friendships, nurturing connections with fellow students, and building meaningful relationships with my professors.

As a foster care youth, transitioning into college can be tough. One piece of advice that I hold dear and would like to share with everyone is this: "Take your time; everything will eventually fall into place." When I first stepped into the world of college, I was immediately confronted with the pressure to meet deadlines and the pressure I placed on myself to excel in my coursework. Many of these deadlines revolved around critical financial aid requirements, such as the FAFSA and CHAFEE deadlines. Navigating these forms and knowing whom to contact for assistance could be bewildering. I found that closely reviewing the financial aid forms and not hesitating to seek guidance from my ILP manager, the financial aid department at my college, or a trustworthy individual, like my IL worker, proved to be immensely helpful. My IL worker has been a guiding light when it comes to deciphering these complex forms and processes.

"One of my biggest challenges was finding the right balance between my work life, academics, social life, and various extracurricular activities I was passionate about. To prevent burnout and maintain my grades,



I decided to consult with my IL case manager for support. Together, we crafted a well-structured schedule that allowed me to allocate time for studying, working, and enjoying my social life. Prioritizing what mattered most to me played a crucial role in this balancing act. I realized that my family and social life were at the top of my priority list since they've been the foundation of my journey. Following that, school, work, and extracurricular activities fell in line. Understanding your priorities is, I believe, one of the most crucial aspects of being a successful college student.

“Unlike many freshmen who reside on campus, I opted for a different living arrangement. This introduced its own set of challenges, particularly in finding an affordable apartment close to the university in a safe neighborhood. Yet again, I turned to my IL worker for guidance, as I frankly lacked the initial knowledge and direction. Together, we navigated the process, ultimately securing a suitable apartment and utilizing programs like FYI (akin to Section 8) for assistance. Through this experience, I learned the value of government assistance programs, particularly my participation in FYI, which offers rent support for up to three years. I want to stress that seeking help from government resources should be met without hesitation or shame. There's an array of options available to foster care youth, spanning from assistance with groceries, bills, transportation, and more. Accepting support is not a sign of weakness; rather, it's a demonstration of strength and practicality.

“Furthermore, I want to stress the significance of using the resources available to you and maintaining open lines of communication with your support network. Whether it's your resource parents, case manager, teacher, coach, or a trusted friend, these individuals are there to help you succeed. As foster care youth, we've faced unique challenges, and these resources are provided not because we lack intelligence or capability, but because we've had a difficult hand dealt to us in life, and we are determined to improve our circumstances.

“Reflecting on my journey, I've learned that seeking help doesn't make you weak; it demonstrates your strength and determination. People recognize that you've faced adversity but are actively working towards a brighter future. Additionally, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of effective communication, particularly with professors. Engaging in discussions about questions, comments, and concerns has significantly enriched my academic experience. As I eagerly look forward to returning to college this fall, I am wholeheartedly committed to continuing my journey of learning and personal growth.

“In summary, there are many valuable takeaways from my experiences. Firstly, never hesitate to lean on your support network; they genuinely want to see you succeed in your endeavors. Secondly, don't let stress overwhelm you. We all start somewhere, and no one has all the answers right from the beginning. Be patient, ask questions, and voice your concerns because, ultimately, you are planning for your life, and you should be the one in control of that journey. With the right people and the right support, I firmly believe you can achieve everything you set out to accomplish.”

Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver Program

The Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver Program, created by Act 16 of 2019, seeks to remove barriers in accessing a postsecondary education for youth who are, or have been, in foster care. This will allow eligible foster youth to complete their studies, graduate with less debt, and have the opportunity to build a network of support. The program is being administered collaboratively by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) in conjunction with the PA departments of Education, Human Services, and Labor & Industry.

Are You Eligible? To be eligible for the tuition waiver, students must meet the following criteria:

- Be a Pennsylvania resident
- Be under age 26
- Received a high school diploma or equivalent approved credential
- Be eligible for services under Pennsylvania's John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood
- Be identified as a youth in foster care or a youth discharged from foster care at age 16 or older
- Exited foster care on or after age 16 to adoption or permanent legal guardianship
- Be enrolled as an undergraduate, at least half time, in a postsecondary institution that is approved by the U.S. Department of Education for Title IV student assistance programs
- Demonstrate financial need for the PA Chafee Education and Training Grant (Chafee ETG), as determined by the postsecondary institution
- Maintain satisfactory academic progress, as determined by the postsecondary institution
- Not be in default on a federal student loan.

Visit the Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver Program Website for more information: <https://www.pheaa.org/funding-opportunities/other-educational-aid/foster-education.shtml>





Is it time for you to take the NYTD survey? Do you have questions about why you're being asked to take the survey or its importance? Well, keep reading as we answer some of the frequently asked questions when it comes to taking the NYTD survey.

First, what is NYTD? NYTD (pronounced "knighted"), stands for the National Youth in Transition Database. This is a survey designed to track how the state has served you, an older youth, in care. It measures how well states are helping foster youth prepare for adulthood.

<http://www.payab.pitt.edu/NYTD.htm>

Secondly, how do you fit in with NYTD? The information gathered from NYTD helps Pennsylvania determine what impact they have made on your life. The survey gives agencies, staff, and lawmakers real feedback, from real youth, about the services that are provided and whether they are making a difference for youth exiting, or who have exited, foster care.

Last, but certainly not least, how do you get involved with NYTD? Glad you asked! All you must do is complete the NYTD survey before the deadline when you are contacted to take it. Spread the word to your peers and other youth in care. Talk to them about the survey and how it's important to their lives as well.

Mental Health

With the change in season comes an increased risk of depression. Below are some tips that promote and boost positive mental well-being:

- *Talk about your feelings!* Talking with someone you trust is a great coping method. Being listened to can help you feel supported and affirms you don't have to deal with your issues alone.
- *Stay active!* It has been proven that exercise, including taking a walk, jogging, swimming, or even dancing, reduces anxiety and depression.
- *Practice Self-Care!* Carve out time in your daily schedule to do something just for you. If you are engaged in something that's taking a lot of time, such as a school project or work, be sure to step away for some fresh air. This is a great way to boost your mental state.
- *Take time to unplug!* Disconnecting from your phone and other technology is a great way to de-stress. Take a break from the constant alerts, emails, and social media and connect with someone face-to-face or do something you love.
- *Write it out!* Writing your thoughts and journaling are great tools to reduce stress and boost your mood. Journaling before bed can help you unwind and relax.

Remember: your mental health is just as important as your physical health! If you are experiencing a crisis or know someone who is, you can get immediate support:

You can get peer support by calling **1-877-YOUTHLINE**

You may live chat by visiting [HTTP://WWW.HOPELINE.COM](http://www.hopeline.com)

You can also Text **HOME** to **741741** for crisis support



Federal Student Aid

According to Federal Student Aid, President Biden, Vice President Harris, and the U.S. Department of Education have announced a plan to help reduce student loans, which includes loan forgiveness of up to \$20,000.

Please use this link for more information: <https://studentaid.gov/debt-relief-announcement>

5 Tips for Financial Aid:

College is a lot – we all know that. From moving out of your house and into a new place with new people and new areas, college is a one-of-a-kind experience. Even though college is fun, some things can be difficult. We have gathered some tips to help you better understand Financial Aid and have a smoother experience.

1. Be aware of deadlines.
The FAFSA opens every Oct. 1st, though the Federal deadline to apply isn't until June 30th of the following year. Make sure you know when the deadlines for applications are and if you have any questions, speak with your financial aid advisor or with a trusted adult.
2. Apply early!
Make sure you are on top of your financial aid and apply early. Like they say, "The early bird catches the worm."
3. Check emails regularly.
After completing all of your financial aid, make sure you are paying attention to emails for updates and changes.
4. Communication/support
Here is one of the most important things to remember: If you have any questions about financial aid, please ask a trusted adult or your financial aid advisor. It is never wrong to ask about things you do not understand. So, when in doubt, ask.
5. Take the SATs.
The Child Welfare Resource Center distributes SAT Reasoning and SAT Subject Test Electronic Fee Waiver codes to aid foster care youth in care in PA with continuing their higher education. If you are a youth who is currently in high school and interested in taking the SATs, please ask your IL worker to contact Sherri Krodel at slk114@pitt.edu for more information.

Self-Advocacy Tools

The definition of self-advocacy is the process of communicating one's needs to others. As an older youth in care, many times, conversations regarding your well-being and decisions for your life are made in your absence. These decisions take place in an office, home setting, school, and most importantly, in court. Your presence and your voice matter. You have a right to speak up about things that impact your life. Stay connected to YAB through the BLAST Newsletter, Facebook, and Instagram to learn information to build your Self-Advocacy Toolkit at <http://www.payab.pitt.edu>.

According to the Know Your Rights Guide, Pennsylvania policies surrounding siblings “recognize that siblings share life experiences that create and solidify the sibling bond.” Federal law requires that reasonable efforts be made to place you and your siblings together. However, if this cannot happen, PA law then requires that frequent visits occur with the minimum being at least twice per month. It is also mandated that ongoing efforts be made to find a home where you and your sibling(s) can be placed together. If visitations are not occurring, you have the right to inform your attorney and speak to the judge while in court. Read chapter 17 of the Know Your Rights Guide to learn the steps to take to [get your voice heard](#). You can view the entire Know Your Rights Guide by visiting the Juvenile Law Center's website at <https://jlc.org>.

Resources

Mental Health National Suicide Prevention Hotline: **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

National Crisis Text Hotline: **Text HOME to 741741**

Housing Homeless National Hotline: **1-800-786-2929**

National Youth & Teen Runaway Hotline: **1-800-Runaway Health & Safety**

National Domestic Violence Support Hotline: **1-800-799-SAFE**

National STD Hotline: **1-800-227-8922**

Legal Support Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network: **1-800-322-7572**

Child Help National Child Abuse Hotline: **1-800-422-4453**

2023 Older Youth Retreat



The 2023 Older Youth Retreat took place at the University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown campus from August 7th to the 11th. A diverse group of nearly 80 youth, aged 16-20, representing 27 counties across Pennsylvania, participated in this enriching experience within the foster care system. Throughout this engaging week, youth had the opportunity to learn and have a great time together. Each day's conclusion involved meetings between youth and staff to ensure their mental and physical well-being.

Here are some memorable highlights from the Older Youth Retreat:

Tuesday was filled with hands-on activities such as Pardon My Garden, You Leading You, and the All-Star Sports Experience. Peer group activities allowed the youth to get to know each other better. There was an informative presentation about the Youth Advisory Board (YAB), encouraging participation. Youth learned about YAB's structure, goals, and how to get involved. In the evening, they could choose between a dance/karaoke activity or enjoying the game room on campus.

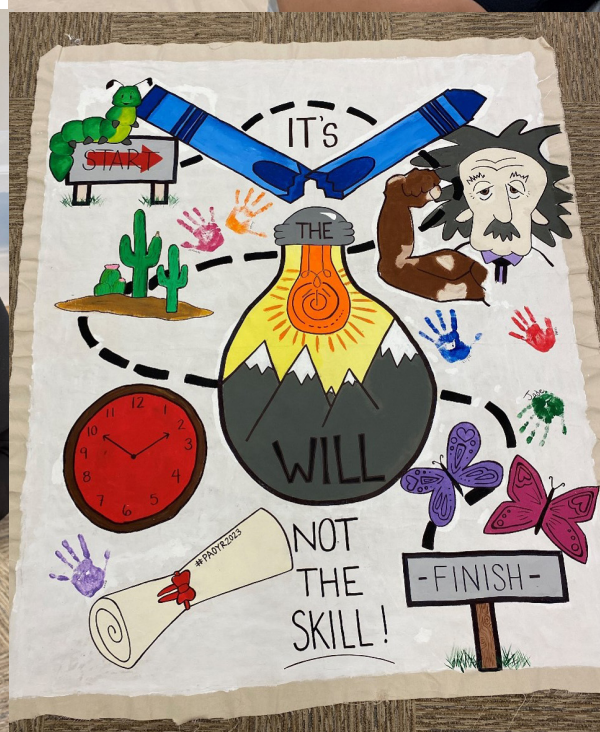
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Wednesday focused on race equity awareness, emphasizing the importance of equality for everyone. Four young adults who had experienced out-of-home placement and adoption shared their stories with the youth and staff, highlighting the significance of finding permanency, whether through adoption or forming a forever family. In the evening, there were opportunities for relaxation and various activities, including swimming, basketball/dodgeball tournaments, couponing, jewelry making, and creative drawing.

Thursday brought an eventful day as youth and staff prepared for competitive field games, with staff cheering them on from the sidelines. Later, youth and staff showcased their talents and creativity from the activity sessions; this included unveiling the retreat banner, performing dance moves, displaying photographs from the photography group, and much more. As the evening approached, everyone enjoyed a delightful picnic before the talent show, where youth displayed their diverse talents, from playing the piano to reciting self-written poems and singing.

By the end of the week, many of the youth had forged new friendships and meaningful connections. The week's theme, "It's the Will, Not the Skill," was exemplified by both youth and staff, demonstrating the power of determination and teamwork.







Yab Graduate

We'd like to take a moment to recognize Catilin for all of her work and support on both the regional and Statewide YABs as well as her participation on the older youth retreat steering committee. We wish her well in her future endeavors!

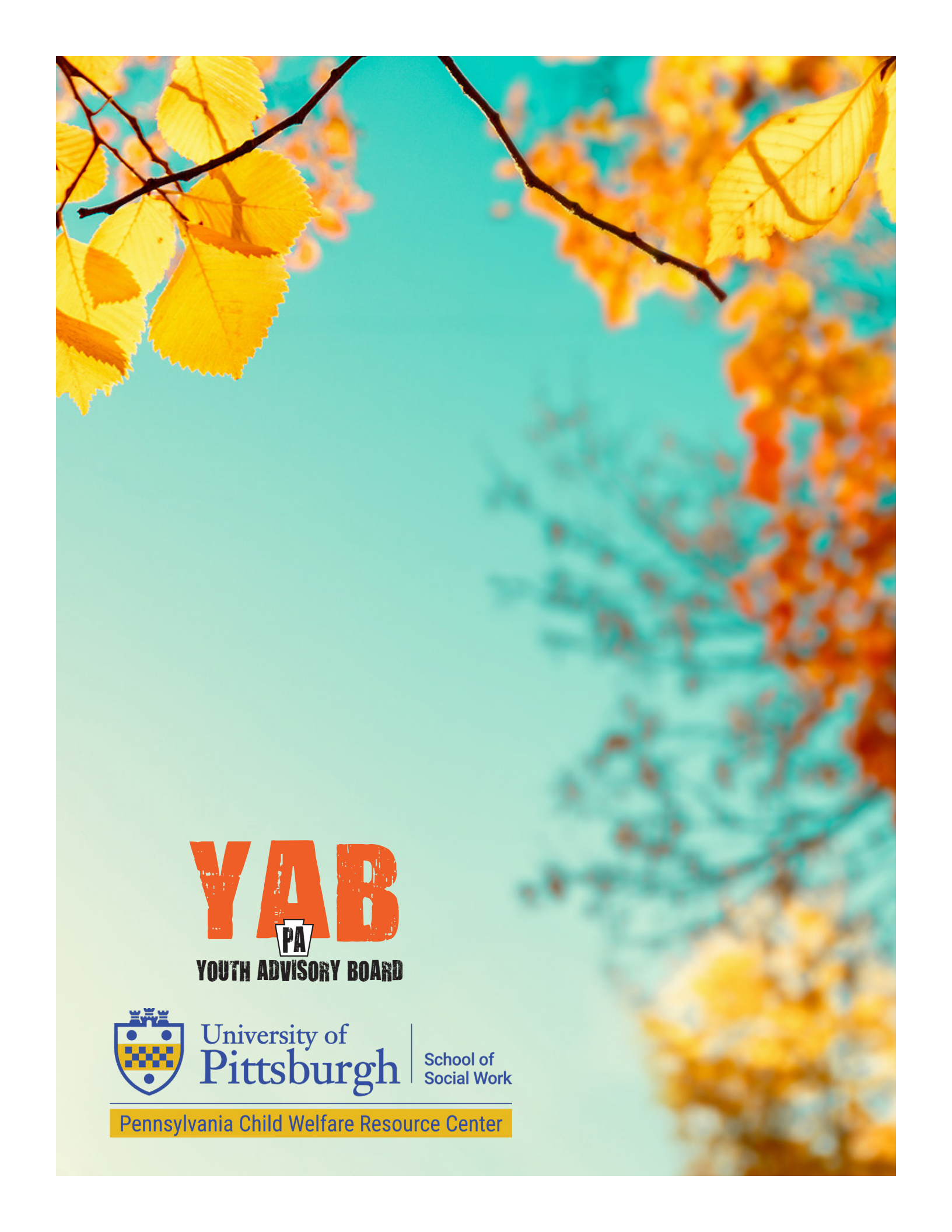
Dates to Remember

Statewide YAB meeting dates:

Please note that the Statewide YAB meetings are held in-person at the PA Child Welfare Resource Center at 403 E. Winding Hill Road, Mechanicsburg, PA 17055.

- Thursday, September 21, 2023
- Thursday, November 30, 2023
- Thursday, January 18, 2024
- Thursday, March 14, 2024





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University of
Pittsburgh

School of
Social Work

Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center