

Javier Diaz Interview Transcript

Reviewer: Hello, Javier. I know your caseworker talked with you about this interview, but we'll just add that we're here as part of a team of people who are reviewing some cases of the Department of Child and Family Services. We're looking at the services youth and families got while they were involved with the Department and what their overall experiences were. The purpose of this review is to see what the state did well and what it might improve on in order to help things work out better for children and families involved with the Department. So, what you have to say about your experiences will be really important to us. We're going to ask questions about a lot of areas, and some of the things we ask may make you uncomfortable, or you may not want to answer. Just let us know, and we'll move on to something else. Also, we want to let you know that any information you give us is confidential and won't be shared with your caseworker. I'm going to be asking most of the questions, and my partner here will be taking notes while we talk so he and I won't forget anything. For starters, do you have any questions about anything I've said so far?

Javier Diaz: No, no questions.

Reviewer: Okay, let's proceed. To begin with, can you tell us what happened that you're in foster care?

Javier Diaz: Sure. About a year ago, one night at my aunt and uncle's house, they got mad at me, and my uncle decked me. He gave me a big black eye with a cut. My sister saw the blood and freaked out and called 911. The police came, then CPS came. They took me to the doctor, then we went back home and talked a while, and everyone decided that it was best for me not to stay there anymore. So, I got put in foster care. First, I lived with Juanita Lopez, my friend Oliver's aunt. She was cool, and we got along great, but then she got another job and moved to another town. So, I went to live with the Dovers a while. That didn't work out so well, and I ran away from there twice. Back in January, I got moved to Gateway Group Home. I like it there a lot, and that's where I'm going to stay until I turn 18 and get out of foster care.

Reviewer: Did you feel safe at your aunt and uncle's home?

Javier Diaz: No, I didn't feel safe with them. My uncle had a bad temper, and, if I had ended up staying there, I know he would have hurt me again some other time because we weren't getting along at all. And my aunt didn't try to take up for me.

Reviewer: Do you feel like your caseworker has made sure that you were safe since you left there?

Javier Diaz: Yes. She put me places where the people kept a good eye on me and made sure I was safe, and there was no danger. And she was always asking me if I felt safe where I was, if I felt safe at school, if I felt safe when I visited my aunt and uncle, and things like that. She encouraged me over and over to tell her right away if something made me feel like I was at risk. I always told her I did feel safe and that the people I was with in all three places watched over me and made sure I was okay.

Reviewer: Tell us about your placement with the Dovers. Why didn't that work out for you?

Javier Diaz: They were nice enough, I guess, but they didn't really accept me because I'm gay. I think I made them uncomfortable, and I didn't like the way they looked at me all the time and then looked at each other. And sometimes they made put-down remarks about gay people in front of me. I was tired of staying in my room all the time, and I just felt like I couldn't stay there any longer. I told my caseworker, but she just said to give it more time and get to know them better. So, I ran away. I was gone 3-4 days, then the police found me at the mall, and I went back to the Dovers. I decided to give it another try and thought my caseworker would talk to them about how they were treating me. When we finally all sat down to talk about it, they just lectured me about not acting gay in front of the other foster kids. So, I stayed there a couple of weeks longer, got through Christmas, then I ran away again. I went to my parents' house and stayed there that night, but they couldn't keep me. They were afraid they'd get in trouble, so they made me call my caseworker, and she came and got me. I told her I wasn't going to stay with the Dovers any longer, but I had to go back for a few days until she found me a place at Gateway.

Reviewer: Did your caseworker talk with you about the struggles you were having coming out as gay and the difficulties you were having with other people while you were coming out?

Javier Diaz: Not really. We talked around it sometimes, and, when I'd tell her that people didn't accept me for who I was, she'd usually say, "I know, Javier, and I'm so sorry." That was about it.

Reviewer: How do you think your current placement at Gateway is working out?

Javier Diaz: It's a great place. I think I lucked out. They take all of us to our different schools every day, so I got to stay in the same school. I really like my case manager, Mr. Shaw, and Mr. Jamison, my therapist, is awesome. I like all the other kids there except for one, and he and I just kind of ignore each other; it's no big deal. They take good care of us there, help us do our homework, take us to movies and places, help us visit our families and stay in touch with people, talk to us about our problems, help us work on our goals, get us pizza when we want it, and all kinds of things. They also have LGBTQ groups there, and I like those a lot. I want to stay there until I'm 18 or until I get out of high school. I might stay there even longer because they have these apartments the 18- and 19-year-olds can live in while they work or go to college.

Reviewer: Can you tell us what your permanency plan or goal is and if you think it's the right goal for you?

Javier Diaz: Well, first I had reunification with my aunt and uncle, but that didn't work out because they don't want to change, and I don't want to go back there unless they do. So, then my caseworker and I talked a lot about adoption, then about an OPPLA goal. I really thought about adoption long and hard, and we talked about it several times, but I decided I just didn't want to make the effort to fit into another family when I'm already 16. I have a family, and I stay in touch with lots of relatives, and I know they'll be there for me when I get out of high school, and I'm on my own. And I really like being at Gateway and don't want to move. So, I wanted an OPPLA goal. Everyone talked to me to make sure I really understood what an adoption goal meant and what an OPPLA goal meant. I talked to my caseworker, my therapist, and my GAL. I decided I wanted OPPLA for sure, and that's what I told the judge. At Gateway, we signed a paper saying they'll keep me there until I'm at least 18. So, I feel good about that.

Reviewer: How often do you visit with your aunt and uncle, and could you tell us how the visits go?

Javier Diaz: I see both of them about once a month. They visit me at Gateway, or sometimes I go to their house when other relatives are there, and a couple of times we've visited at my caseworker's office. I'd say the visits are usually 45 minutes or an hour long, depending on how much time my aunt and uncle have. Every once in a while, my uncle is tied up with something and doesn't come, or that's what he says. The visits go okay; we just talk and don't fight like we did when I was at home. My aunt talks to me more than my uncle does. I look forward to seeing them.

Reviewer: Did you have a visit with them this month?

Javier Diaz: Yes, they came to Gateway a couple of weeks ago. Maria came with them.

Reviewer: So how often do you see Maria and your other relatives?

Javier Diaz: Maria and I see each other a couple of times a month usually. She comes to visit, or I sometimes go there, or we run into each other at school activities. We call and text all the time, too. Sometimes my aunt and uncle get annoyed with her because she's always on her phone calling or texting me or her friends. I see my other relatives pretty often. My Aunt Gloria and Aunt Lana come by Gateway and pick me up sometimes, and I see my other relatives at my aunt and uncle's house. And we all talk on the phone.

Reviewer: How do you think your caseworker figures out what you need? And do you think you've gotten everything you need since you've been in foster care?

Javier Diaz: I guess she figures it out by talking with me. I know she talks to the people at the group home, too. She's pretty good about making sure I have what I need. She's really encouraged me to be active in my drama group. She came to my play this year. My aunt and Maria came, too, and so did people from Gateway—so that was cool to see them all there. My caseworker also thought it was great that I got to do the drama camp this summer; that was a really neat experience. One thing I wish that she'd have done, though, is help me stay in touch more with my parents. They're down on their luck right now, and I know I can't go live with them, but I'd really like to see them some and stay in better touch.

Reviewer: How much contact do you have with your parents? And has your caseworker done anything to help with that?

Javier Diaz: I think I've seen them just two or three times since I've been in foster care. One of the times was when I ran away, and, one other time, I ran into them on the street. One time they pulled up to my aunt and uncle's house just as I was leaving from a visit, and I got to say hello to them. I try to call them every few weeks, but a lot of times they've run out of minutes on their phone, so I can't get them. And no, my caseworker really hasn't done anything to help me stay in better touch with them. She knows I want to see them more, but I guess she thinks it's not important or something.

Reviewer: Since you're 16 and a half now, do you get independent living or life skills services, and do you think you're getting what you need?

Javier Diaz: Well, that's kind of been a problem because Gateway didn't have an IL person until the summer. I think it was July and August that we did some neat things—we learned about shopping and cooking and about money management. We went to a bank and talked to a lot of

people about bank accounts and credit and debit cards and credit reports and things. And then we talked about going to college and what all you have to do to apply and then stay in school.

Reviewer: Did you have any kind of life skills training or experience this month, September?

Javier Diaz: No, we didn't do anything this month because the new IL person that Gateway hired already left and took another job. Bummer...she was fun.

Reviewer: We saw on your Transitional Living Plan that you put getting a job as your top priority. Can you tell us what's happened with that?

Javier Diaz: I wish I knew! I talk to my caseworker about it at just about every visit, and she always says they're going to fix me up with a mentor to help me, then nothing happens. Even if they can't find a mentor, I just wish someone would help me. I don't really know how you fill out job applications or what you're supposed to say in job interviews. I've talked to Gateway about it, too, but they say that other things have priority right now. I'd really like to have a part-time job so I could put some money back for when I'm on my own.

Reviewer: Do you feel like you've been fully involved in the case planning for your case?

Javier Diaz: I really do. My caseworker has had several case planning meetings where we all get together and decide what to do, and they write it all up, and we all sign it and get a copy. We talk at our visits about what's been done and what hasn't and what needs to still be done.

Reviewer: How often does your caseworker visit you, and where do you visit? What kinds of things do you talk about?

Javier Diaz: I see my caseworker at least once a month. She's pretty much been there when I've needed her, and I like my visits with her. She usually comes to see me at Gateway, and sometimes we go out somewhere. We have good talks. We talk about my aunt and uncle and Maria and my other relatives, what's going on at school, what kinds of things I'm doing and working on at Gateway, how my therapy is going, if I feel safe, and things like that.

Reviewer: Does your caseworker always see you alone? And how long do the visits last?

Javier Diaz: Yes, most of the time we're alone for the whole visit. And the visits usually last about an hour...sometimes a little longer.

Reviewer: Has your caseworker visited you this month?

Javier Diaz: Yes, we've had our September visit; we talked about school a lot. We already have our October visit scheduled.

Reviewer: How is school going for you this year, and how did it go last year?

Javier Diaz: School's going great for me this year. I like every single one of my teachers, I have great friends, and I've even made a couple of new friends. I'm taking a pottery class this year, and I like it a lot. Last year, I had some problems. I came into foster care at the first of last school year, so I was going through a lot. When I ran away in December, I had unexcused

absences, and some of my grades tanked. My caseworker and I met with the school counselor, though, and I started getting tutored in math and doing extra assignments, and I brought all my grades up. Gateway helped me a lot with that. My caseworker really encouraged me and checked on me while that was going on, and everything worked out okay.

Reviewer: Do you feel like you've had good medical and dental care since you've been in foster care?

Javier Diaz: Definitely. My caseworker had me see a doctor and a dentist and have an eye exam when I first came into foster care, then I saw the dentist again a few months ago. I've only been sick one time. A couple of months ago, I had to go to the doctor for a stomach bug.

Reviewer: Tell us about your therapy sessions. What kinds of things do you talk about, and do you think the therapy has helped you?

Javier Diaz: I think it's helped a lot. I had this one therapist first—Ms. Southern, I think her name was—but my therapist now is Mr. Jamison, and he really knows what he's doing. I see him every week for an hour, and we talk about my aunt and uncle and my parents, and all the things that have happened to me the past year, and he helps me know how to deal with people that make fun of me or make cruel remarks and things. He helps me understand that that's their problem and not mine. The woman who runs the LGBTQ groups talks to him, and sometimes he and I talk more about things that have come up in the groups. I feel like I can talk to him about pretty much anything.

Reviewer: Tell us about your depression and the medication you take for it.

Javier Diaz: Oh, that doctor...Pemberly I think his name is. I saw him when I first came into foster care. He thinks I'm depressed, and he put me on Prozac. So, I've been taking it for a year now. I really hate it. It makes me so tired sometimes, and it makes my thinking fuzzy a lot of the time. I think the medicine makes me depressed, instead of helping me not to be depressed. Besides, I don't think I've really had a problem with depression since I've been at Gateway. I tell you what—if there wasn't staff watching me take that pill every morning, I'd have probably stopped a long time ago.

Reviewer: Does Dr. Pemberly see you from time to time so he can keep an eye on your medication?

Javier Diaz: Yes, I see him every 3 months, I think, for just a few minutes. He always seems like he's in a big hurry. He rushes in and asks me how I'm doing, then he doesn't really even wait for me to tell him. He doesn't listen to people...he wants to do all the talking. I don't like to go there.

Reviewer: Have you talked to your caseworker about how you feel about the medication? If so, how does she respond?

Javier Diaz: I've complained about it to her a few times. At first, she said I needed to give it more time. After that, she just kind of ignored me or said she thought it must be helping me because I was doing so well. I've mentioned it to my therapist and case manager, too. They've told me there are certain things they can get involved in and certain things they can't, that my caseworker has to take care of some things. And this is something my caseworker needs to

take care of. I think they've talked to her about it, but she hasn't talked to the doctor or anything yet, or, if she has, she didn't tell me.

Reviewer: Javier, you've given us so much good information that really helps us to understand your case better. We're glad you felt free to be so honest with us about everything. Before we go, is there anything else you'd like to tell us that we haven't asked about?

Javier Diaz: I'd just like to say that I think it should be a rule, when a kid's in foster care, that the caseworker has to help the kid see his parents on a regular basis if the kid wants to.

Reviewer: Thank you for passing that on. And thank you again for meeting with us and answering all our questions.