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202/624-7822
January 2007

State Policies to Help Youth Transition Out of Foster Care

Executive Summary

Most youth who leave the foster care system do not receive adequate preparation and support for their transition to independent living. Compared to other youth, foster youth are more likely to be homeless, incarcerated, unemployed, and unskilled. They are also more likely to experience physical, developmental, behavioral, and mental health challenges.

In response to these challenges, policymakers in many states have stepped up their commitment to meeting the needs of youth in foster care. States are working to help youth leaving foster care become healthy, productive adults by:

- promoting stable, permanent connections to caring adults;
- assisting youth with the management of their physical and mental health needs;
- supporting economic success through education and employment programs;
- providing life skills training to help youth navigate the adult world;
- improving access to stable and safe housing; and
- structuring opportunities for youth to provide input on state policies and programs.

Several states are also taking a comprehensive approach that connects child welfare with other youth-serving systems, such as workforce development, postsecondary education, mental health, and juvenile justice. These cross-system efforts aim to ensure access to and easier navigation of a richer and better coordinated array of services for current and former foster youth.

Because governors have the power to set agendas, assign responsibilities, and redirect resources, they are uniquely positioned to set the direction of foster care reforms in their states. Governors can:

- ensure youth transitioning out of foster care have access to a comprehensive array of programs and services that address their permanency, health, economic, life skills, and housing needs;
- promote opportunities for foster youth to provide input on programs and services;
- develop policies and partnerships that seamlessly connect child welfare with other youth-serving systems; and

- call on the business, volunteer, and philanthropic communities to sponsor work experience, mentoring, and asset development opportunities.

By providing the leadership needed to strengthen state policies, improve coordination across agencies and systems, better utilize resources, and meaningfully engage foster youth, governors can improve the outcomes of youth leaving the foster care system and at-risk youth in general.

States Challenged by the Needs of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

State courts and child welfare agencies are responsible for the safety and well-being of more than a half-million children in foster care at any given time.¹ Youth ages 16 and older make up approximately 19 percent of all children in foster care.² While many youth eventually return to their biological families or find another permanent home through adoption or guardianship, approximately 20,000 foster youth age out of the child welfare system each year.³

The transition to adulthood is challenging for every adolescent, but for youth in foster care these challenges are further compounded by instability. Many youth spend years in the foster care system, experiencing multiple placements and numerous disruptions to their schooling. One study found that more than 30 percent of youth in foster care had eight or more placements with foster families or group homes. Sixty-five percent experienced seven or more school changes from elementary through high school.⁴ As a result, foster youth are often disconnected from family and social networks.⁵ Further, approximately half of foster youth drop out of high school, limiting their ability to secure employment and achieve self-sufficiency.

In addition to instability, many foster youth face physical, developmental, behavioral, and mental health challenges. Current and former foster youth are more likely than their same-age peers to experience substance abuse and mental illness, teen pregnancy and early parenthood, homelessness, and arrests. In many cases, the circumstances that led to a youth's placement in the foster care system have taken a serious emotional toll. One study found youth in foster care experienced depression, social phobias, panic disorders, and anxiety disorders at two to four times the rate of the general population.⁶ Twenty-five percent of emancipated youth experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—nearly double the rate of U.S. war veterans.⁷

The lives of foster youth are far from what is considered “normal” for U.S. teenagers. Approximately half of this country's youth ages 18–24 live at home, and nearly two-thirds of young adults in their early 20s receive economic support from their parents.⁸ In contrast, foster youth in most states lose access to many—and in some cases all—of the supports provided by the foster care system when they are released from state custody at age 18.

Congress attempted to address some of these problems through the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA). The act doubled federal funding for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which provides states with funds to assist foster youth with life skills training, education and employment supports, healthcare, permanency, housing assistance, mentoring, and counseling activities. States are required to contribute a 20 percent state match for Chafee funds.

Federal Framework for Foster Youth in Transition

Approximately 65 federal programs can be used to serve foster youth in transition.⁹ The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 provided states with a dedicated funding stream for foster youth and increased federal spending on independent living programs from \$70 million to \$140 million. The act established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program (CFCIP) and broadened the services states could provide to help foster youth successfully transition to independence, including services for youth up to age 21 who had already aged out of the system. These services include education, training, employment, and financial support. In addition, states may spend up to 30 percent of their Chafee dollars on room and board for former foster youth. Flexible Chafee funding allows states to tailor their programs and services to the needs of their foster youth population.

The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act (PSSF) of 2001 amended FCIA to authorize the Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program for foster youth. In recent years between \$42 million and \$47 million has been appropriated annually by Congress to help states pay for postsecondary education and training and related costs. Foster youth who are eligible for services under CFCIP also meet the eligibility criteria for ETV funds and may receive the lesser of \$5,000 a year or the total cost of attending an institution of higher education. Students who have participated in the ETV program before their 21st birthday may continue to receive this education support up to age 23. Federal program guidelines call for former foster youth to apply for ETV funds in the state where they currently reside; however, many youth apply in the state where they were emancipated, resulting in confusion for states and recipients.¹⁰

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) established a new emphasis on permanency planning for all foster children, including teens in care that traditionally are hard to place in permanent homes. It made inclusion in a permanent family—whether through reunification with biological parents, kinship care, adoption, or another permanent placement—a main priority, stressing that foster care should be a temporary placement. According to ASFA, the goal of a state's child welfare system is to move the child toward permanency as soon as possible.

Other federal programs, such as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid, provide states flexibility to use various funding streams to help youth transition out of foster care. Although these federal programs do not directly target current or former foster youth, states and local jurisdictions may use these funding streams to prioritize service to this population because they meet other eligibility requirements, such as unemployment, low income, homelessness, or single parenthood. Youth in transition may also be a part of various other systems—such as juvenile justice, vocational rehabilitation, or mental health—that make funding available to assist youth.

While states have a great deal of flexibility in how they use Chafee funds, the amount of funding available is insufficient to provide a comprehensive array of services to all emancipating youth. As a result, states must piece together additional services across various systems and agencies. Often, these services are not formally aligned, leaving youth to navigate multiple bureaucracies and fragmented, unconnected services on their own. Moreover, most of these programs—health and mental health, workforce development, and housing—have done little to focus on the special needs of young adults, much less the needs of youth in the foster care system.

State Options to Expand Services for Youth in Transition

Many states have stepped up their efforts to meet the needs of youth in foster care. The FCIA and recent research on youth who have aged out of the foster care system have drawn attention to key issues and helped fuel a growing public consensus that states need to do more to ensure foster youth receive the same opportunities other young people enjoy. Addressing the shortcomings of the foster care system is also fiscally prudent; without adequate supports and preparation, these youth often end up poorly educated, unemployed, pregnant, or incarcerated, imposing even greater costs on state systems.

Because this population is relatively small—numbering approximately 20,000 per year for the entire United States—many experts believe that, with focused efforts, state policymakers can make a significant difference in the outcomes of youth aging out of foster care. To this end, several states are expanding the breadth and, in some cases, duration of services for current and former foster youth, engaging youth in program design and implementation, and improving coordination among youth-serving systems.

Another recent study – the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Northwest Study) – examined the experiences of emancipated youth who were in the care of Casey Family Programs or the Oregon or Washington State foster care systems from 1988 to 1998.¹¹ The Northwest Study found a need for an expanded array of services and supports, including better identification and earlier treatment of mental health issues; access to affordable health care; stable connections to school; ongoing connections to caring adults; a minimal number of foster care placements; and safe, affordable housing.

Consistent with these and other findings from the field about what youth need to succeed, state efforts have focused on the following outcomes and strategies:

- promoting stable, permanent connections to caring adults;
- helping youth manage and meet their health needs;
- supporting economic success through education and employment programs;
- providing life skills training to help youth navigate the adult world; and
- improving access to stable and safe housing.

Extending Foster Care Beyond Age 18

A growing body of research provides direction on improving outcomes for youth in transition. For example, research suggests that allowing youth to remain in foster care voluntarily after age 18 is an important policy option, particularly since many youth do not graduate from high school until after their 18th birthday. The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), a longitudinal study of youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, compared the outcomes of young adults who were still in care at age 19 to the outcomes of youth who had already been discharged. The report found that those youth remaining in state custody for an additional year were more likely to advance their education, have stable housing, stay out of the juvenile justice system, receive independent living services, and have access to health and mental health services.¹²

In many states that extend care past age 18, foster youth may remain in care only if they are enrolled in an educational activity (such as finishing high school or attending a postsecondary institution) or have a special need or disability. A few states, including **Arizona, Idaho, and Illinois**, allow youth to remain in care without any conditions.

Another option is for states to implement a “return policy” for youth who leave foster care at age 18. In **Kentucky**, this policy allows emancipated foster youth who experience difficulties to return to state care, where they are assured of having health insurance, housing, and continued support.¹³

To prepare youth for the transition to independence, researchers recommend that independent living services be provided to youth as early as age 13 and continued through their early-to-mid 20s. States are required to use at least a portion of their Chafee funds for older youth who have left the foster care system but have not yet reached age 21. In addition, while previous law limited services to children 16 and older, Chafee now allows states to provide independent living services to children of younger ages when appropriate.

Permanency Planning: Building Stable, Lifelong Relationships

Social networks serve a number of important functions as youth make the transition into adulthood and independent living. Social ties provide young adults with emotional support; guidance on employment, education, and relationship issues; and assistance in times of emergency. For youth aging out of foster care, strong, stable relationships promote a sense of normalcy and security.

Most young adults who are raised by their birth families have built-in, lifelong support networks of parents, siblings, extended family, and family friends. Such relationships, however, are not assured for youth who have spent time in the foster care system. Hard work is often required to develop and maintain stable, permanent relationships for youth aging out of foster care. Case workers, judges, and other decision makers can work with youth to develop a permanency plan and explore the viability of various permanency options for older youth, including:

- connecting youth to family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles;

- establishing legal guardianship or some other permanent arrangement with a caring adult in the youth's life;
- helping youth develop relationships with caring adults such as teachers, members of their church, or mentors who share their interests; and
- when appropriate, exploring the viability of reunification with biological parents.

Despite widely held beliefs to the contrary, adoption is also a valid permanency option for some older youth. An increasing number of older youth—up to their early 20s—are pursuing adoptive relationships with adults.

States are experimenting with a variety of strategies to ensure youth do not leave the foster care system without at least one lifelong connection to a caring adult. In **New York**, the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) trains frontline staff to help foster youth reconnect to family members or other caring adults with the goal of creating—before they leave the system—a lifelong relationship with an adult who can function in a parental capacity.¹⁴ A **California** law requires child welfare agencies to take actions so no child leaves foster care without a lifelong connection to a committed adult.¹⁵

In **Massachusetts**, a statewide initiative called [Lifelong Family Connections for Adolescents](#) assists youth as they develop their permanency plans.¹⁶ The program:

- helps youth review their social connections to identify caring adults who are willing and able to make a lifelong commitment;
- develops potential placements for youth who do not have permanent connections within their own social network;
- uses a youth-centered, family-focused permanency planning process that engages family members, significant adults, and social service providers;
- provides relationship training for both youth and their adult counterparts to promote a successful match; and
- offers ongoing support to youth and adults to help them identify community resources and address relationship issues.

In addition to programs such as these, other state options to promote lifelong connections to caring adults provide:

- training and supportive services to help strengthen and sustain the relationships between youth and their adoptive parents or guardians;
- subsidies to the permanent legal guardians of youth who leave foster care so they can live with a guardian when adoption or guardianship is not an option; and
- services to relatives who provide supports to youth when adoption or guardianship is not an option.

States can also explore innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to help youth identify caring adults in their extended family or social networks. Several states, for example, use “family

finder” methods similar to those used to reconnect families after World War II to help youth identify extended family members. Other states have experimented with using the parent locator services of the child support enforcement system.¹⁷

Many states are also working to ensure permanency plans help foster youth build and sustain stable relationships with their same-age peers, siblings, and community members. In April 2006, **Maine** passed legislation that requires the custodians of foster youth and parents of adopted youth to facilitate visitation between separated siblings.¹⁸ The passage of LD 1682, *An Act To Support Sibling Rights in Child Welfare Custody Matters* (now Public Law, Chapter 526), was spearheaded by members of the Maine Youth Leadership Advisory Team, an organization of foster youth ages 14–21.

In **Michigan**, the Family to Family initiative aims to reduce the number of placements children experience by placing foster children with *one* permanent and stable family in the child’s own community.¹⁹ The program’s key priorities are reducing the number of placements for each child and the number of children placed in congregate or institutional care. Funded by the Annie E. Casey foundation, the program is being piloted in Wayne and Macomb Counties, and a steering committee was formed to oversee the statewide expansion of the initiative over the next several years.

Helping Youth Access and Manage Health Care

Youth transitioning out of foster care often have difficulty accessing and navigating the health care system.²⁰ These youth often have more intensive health care needs than their same-age peers, but often do not have the resources to pay for treatment or know how and where to seek services.²¹ Because of the expense of health care and insurance, former foster youth struggle to maintain their physical and mental health, especially if they have a disability, mental disorder, or substance abuse problem.

The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study found that one-third (33 percent) of emancipated foster youth had no health insurance—double the national rate of 18 percent for young adults ages 18 to 44.²² The study also found that more than half of emancipated foster youth had one or more mental disorders and experienced post-traumatic stress at twice the rate that of U.S. war veterans.²³

States can address these challenges using a variety of strategies, including extending Medicaid eligibility beyond age 18, ensuring life skills training teaches youth how to monitor and take responsibility for their health, and developing mechanisms to help youth track their medical history. Under FCIA, states have the option to expand Medicaid eligibility to youth who were in foster care on their 18th birthday, are under age 21, and do not exceed income and asset levels as determined by the state.²⁴ If states choose to take advantage of this option, their expenditures continue to be matched at their standard federal Medicaid matching rate.²⁵ Presently, 13 states have chosen to expand Medicaid eligibility: **Arizona, California, Connecticut, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah,** and

Wyoming,²⁶ **Arizona** has no income ceiling for foster youth to qualify for Medicaid, and **Texas** offers Medicaid coverage to all former foster youth up to age 21 who are at or below 400 percent of the federal poverty level.²⁷

Even without state legislation, many current and former foster youth may be eligible for Medicaid based on their income or poverty level, pregnancy or parenthood, or disability status. States such as **Florida**, **Virginia**, and **Washington** have also enacted their own policies for Medicaid eligibility that offer coverage to current and former foster youth who are in an approved postsecondary education program.

Helping Youth Build Life Skills and Acquire Assets

One of states' key obligations to youth in foster care is ensuring they are prepared to navigate the adult world on their own. Foster youth do not always have the same opportunities to learn about household management and other vital adult life skills as youth who live with their birth families. Life skills training is particularly critical for those foster youth who have been placed in group homes or other aggregate settings, where household responsibilities differ from what they are likely to experience on their own.

In response to this need, states are using their Chafee Independent Living Program funds to provide life skills services and training on a variety of topics, including:

- setting up a household (e.g., finding and renting an apartment; turning on utilities);
- managing a household (e.g., ensuring good nutrition, grocery shopping, preparing meals, cleaning, paying bills);
- money management and asset development;
- getting a driver's license, car, and insurance;
- self-confidence, personal responsibility, problem solving, and goal-setting;
- communication and relationship development; and
- reproductive health and parenting.

Thanks to the new flexibility provided by the Chafee program, states increasingly provide independent living skills training to foster youth, from age 13 up to their early 20s.

In **Connecticut**, the [Wilderness School Independent Living Program](#) conducts adventure programs for youth ages 15–18 who are involved in the Connecticut State Department of Children and Families Independent Life Skills programs.²⁸ The program offers one- and five-day wilderness challenge courses that provide the opportunity to learn decision-making and problem-solving skills and increase self-esteem and a sense of personal responsibility. Activities include caving, canoeing, rock climbing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, tracking, backpacking, and a ropes course.

A central element of the wilderness school is the cooperative involvement of the agency that refers the youth. The program encourages referring agency staff and/or the youth's legal

guardians to participate in the program, offering one-to-two day training courses for staff to familiarize them with the school's programs, philosophy, and methodology.

The **California** Department of Social Services contracts with [the Community College Foundation](#) to provide independent living programs (ILPs) through 52 community colleges throughout the state.²⁹ The program brings youth onto their local community college campuses to learn about skills for employment, daily living, survival, choices and consequences, interpersonal relationships, and computers. Sample competencies include opening a bank account, registering at a One-Stop employment center, identifying a caring adult, completing financial aid forms, completing an ILP housing plan, and understanding vocational and educational resources in the community.

The community colleges also build partnerships with group homes, ILP skill centers, One-Stop career centers, and other community-based organizations where youth can access health care, counseling, housing, child care, mentoring, and tutoring. Since its inception in 1984, the program has served over 80,000 foster and probation youth ages 16–21 statewide.

Some independent living programs focus on helping youth save money and acquire assets. A model that is receiving considerable interest is [The Opportunity Passport](#), the centerpiece of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. The Opportunity Passport has three components: a personal debit account for short-term expenses; a matched savings account (individual development account or IDA) that can be used to save for specific assets such as a vehicle, tuition, or a housing down payment/deposit; and Door Openers, special local programs that give youth opportunities such as preapproval to register for community college courses or expedited access to job training or adult education courses.

Jim Casey provides a one-to-one match for participants' IDAs. However, at several Opportunity Passport sites, that match is supplemented by other funds, some with specific criteria. In Atlanta, the local United Way donates additional funding to provide for a four-to-one match, but allows its funds to be used only for purchases allowed by the Federal Assets for Independence (AFI) IDA program. AFI has a stricter definition of what constitutes an "asset" than the definition applied by Jim Casey; for example, AFI savings cannot be used to purchase a vehicle or pay for the deposit on a rental property.³⁰

The Opportunity Passport initiative is currently being piloted at 10 sites: **Atlanta, Georgia; Denver, Colorado; Des Moines, Iowa; Detroit and 10 Michigan counties; Hartford/Bridgeport, Connecticut; Maine; Nashville, Tennessee; Providence, Rhode Island; San Diego, California; and Tampa, Florida** (a co-investment site with the Eckerd Family Foundation). By the end of May 2006, nearly 1500 young people had participated in the program, depositing \$900,251 in IDAs over the past 35 months. Almost 300 participants purchased one or more approved assets.

States can help youth develop assets by setting up new IDA programs, developing IDA programs that meet specific needs not served by other programs (for example, the federal AFI does not cover automobile purchases), or providing tax credits for contributions to IDA programs. Although not specific to foster youth, **Oregon's** IDA Tax Credit "kick-started" the state IDA pool

by qualifying donations to the Oregon IDA program as tax-deductible charitable contributions for both individuals and corporations. The contribution can also be applied as a 75 percent tax credit on Oregon state income tax returns.³¹

Promoting Educational Attainment

States can support the educational aspirations of foster youth by structuring policies and programs that encourage goal-setting, minimize disruptions, and inform youth about educational opportunities. Foster youth face many challenges in meeting their educational goals. They often experience school disruption as they change foster homes and schools, causing them to struggle academically and, in many cases, fall behind. Sixty-five percent of foster youth in the Northwest Study experienced seven or more school changes from elementary through high school.³² Research suggests children in foster care have a higher incidence of special education needs as well.

The Northwest Study also found that youth in foster care complete high school at a somewhat lower rate (70 to 84.8 percent) than youth in the general population (87.3 percent).³³ They are also far more likely than their counterparts to complete their diploma through a General Education Diploma (GED) (28.5 percent vs. 5 percent).³⁴ The rate for completing a bachelor's or higher degree (1.8 to 2.7 percent) was much lower than that of the general population (27.5 percent).³⁵ Fewer than one in five youth studied (16.1 percent) had obtained a vocational degree.³⁶

Encouraging foster youth to graduate from high school and pursue postsecondary education or training is a key element of state policy and practice for older foster youth. States can:

- minimize school changes by keeping foster youth in the same school during a placement change;
- create or enroll youth in tutoring programs;
- ensure coordination and monitoring of individualized education plans (IEPs) among case workers for youth with disabilities;
- counsel foster youth while they are in high school about postsecondary education or job training options;
- help foster youth complete college applications and obtain financial aid;
- connect students with mentors to encourage postsecondary achievement and career development;
- work with foster youth and school administrators to track academic records; and
- waive tuition for foster youth at state higher educational institutions and offer scholarships that cover all costs, such as books, room and board, and clothing.

States may also need to review their eligibility standards for education-related supports. Youth who only attend classes part-time because of full-time work, for example, are often excluded from education supports. Similarly, states may wish to extend services to adopted youth to avoid placing them in the difficult position of choosing between educational assistance and adoption.

The **Maine** Children's Cabinet has created [Keeping Maine's Children Connected](#), an initiative that establishes a formal system of communication among state agencies, school districts, correctional facilities, and in-patient psychiatric care units and stresses the importance of a stable school placement for youth in foster care, juvenile justice, and mental health systems. Maine is training and placing liaisons in each of these systems and school districts to develop and support each youth's education plan. This interagency effort aims to improve educational outcomes by reducing the number of school changes and increasing a youth's sense of belonging to a community and school.

States can use their federal Chafee Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) funds to provide up to \$5,000 per student for postsecondary education and related costs. Several states supplement ETV funds with need-based scholarships or tuition waivers for state universities. Because emancipated youth often have no home to go to during school breaks, states can also work with universities to provide on-campus housing and activities during holidays.

The [Guardian Scholars](#) program in **California** combines public and philanthropic funds to provide a comprehensive scholarship program at a number of state colleges and universities. At [Cal State Fullerton](#), former foster youth are awarded five-year scholarships, guaranteed year-round, on-campus housing, and given access to on-campus employment opportunities, one-to-one counseling, peer and faculty mentoring, biweekly meetings with program staff and volunteers, and assistance with career planning and development.

In **Washington**, the [Treehouse Coaching-to-College](#) program matches volunteers who serve as coaches to high school foster youth to encourage them to pursue post-secondary options. The coaches help foster youth with college and financial aid applications and identify potential career paths. The [Washington State Governor's Scholarship for Foster Youth](#) helps youth who will emancipate from the state or federally recognized foster, group, or kinship care to enroll in and complete degrees or certificates at eligible colleges in Washington. Youth receive a mentor the first two years in college and scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000, depending on need.

Connecting Youth to Employment and Career Opportunities

Securing employment is a vital step on the path to self-sufficiency. While youth who have aged out of foster care have similar employment rates as their same-age peers, they tend to earn less, with over three-quarters earning less than \$5,000 annually. The Midwest "Outcomes at Age 19" study found that most youth had a paying job in the prior year, but the work was sporadic and paid low wages.³⁷ Even more discouraging, a study of youth emancipating from the California system found that about 25 percent of young women drew welfare benefits in each of the six years immediately following emancipation, compared with about 6 percent of their same-age, female peers.³⁸

To respond to these challenges, a recent report from the Foster Care Work Group (a national group of foundation executives) recommends that states help youth in care develop the habits, attitudes, and skills they need to get and keep a job; help youth secure jobs; And give young people leaving foster care opportunities to learn about career options.³⁹

Many states are partnering with the public workforce system (i.e., One-Stop career centers), employers, and community colleges to serve their current and former foster youth more effectively. Some states provide current and former foster youth priority services at One-Stops through memorandums of understanding or contracts with community-based providers. Additionally, states and local areas can use youth funding under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act to provide employment and training services to foster youth.

States also have the option to engage employers in helping foster youth prepare for work. The Annie E. Casey School-to-Career Partnerships—operating in Baltimore, **Maryland**; Hartford, **Connecticut**; New York, **New York**; Oakland, **California**; Providence, **Rhode Island**; San Antonio, **Texas**; San Diego, California; and **Maine**—provide workplace skills in a hands-on environment for foster youth ages 16–24. Modeled after a public-private partnership started in Baltimore in 1999, the program offers eligible youth a variety of services, including job-readiness training; job opportunities with major employers such as UPS, Home Depot, and Marriot International; tuition reimbursement; health benefits; work supports; and job retention services.⁴⁰ In 2003, more than 340 youth across eight program sites were placed in jobs with an average wage of \$7.92 per hour. Fifty-one percent received health benefits, and the program had an 81 percent retention rate.⁴¹

Tennessee has also engaged employers in finding employment opportunities for foster youth as they age out of the system. Nashville companies such as Asurion and US Bank have earmarked job positions for former foster youth. US Bank also provides bank accounts to foster youth and matches their savings to help them buy a car, go to college, or find housing.⁴²

In **South Carolina**, the Department of Social Services has partnered with the Columbia Urban League to provide a leadership development curriculum, job shadowing, and employment for foster youth. Students attend a 20-hour summer job camp in Columbia to prepare for a six-week job shadowing experience. Once they successfully complete the summer job camp, participants spend the next six weeks at a work site and receive a \$600 stipend. Students also attend quarterly workshops during the year. Funded by the South Carolina Department of Social Services, from 2004 to 2005 the program served approximately 200 students in seven counties.⁴³

Enhancing Access to Stable and Safe Housing

Finding affordable, safe, and stable housing is critical to former foster youth's ability to hold steady employment, continue their education, or care for their children. At the time of emancipation, foster youth confront coming up with a deposit and first month's rent, having the appropriate credit to sign a lease, furnishing their home, and making monthly rental payments—sometimes before they have graduated from high school. Because young people are often in low-wage jobs, the shortage of affordable housing poses an additional challenge. As a result, many emancipated foster care youth report being homeless at least once since being discharged from custody, with rates of homelessness ranging from 12 to 36 percent.⁴⁴

To address the need for safe, affordable housing for youth leaving foster care, states can:

- enact policies requiring that no youth are discharged from foster care without safe and stable housing;
- create linkages between state and local housing authorities and community-based organizations to leverage resources;
- take advantage of Chafee dollars for housing needs, such as first month's rent and deposit, furnishings, and emergency funds;
- offer foster youth individual development accounts that provide a state match for money earned that can be used for housing needs; and
- provide rental subsidies to landlords who will rent to foster youth.

States can use several federal funding streams to provide housing for foster youth. At least 10 states have opted to use 30 percent of their Chafee dollars—the maximum allowed under the law—for room and board for former foster youth⁴⁵ Youth may use these funds for first and last month's rent, deposits, and household goods and furnishings, or states may use the funds to create incentive programs for landlords. A number of programs funded by the federal Department for Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Health and Human Services Transitional Living Program for Older Homeless Youth may provide additional sources of funds.⁴⁶

The **Connecticut** Department of Children and Families has developed a [housing continuum](#) that allows youth to move through various levels of supported housing options, from structured, supervised housing to other transitional living settings with decreasing levels of supervision over time. The referral process begins at age 14, when youth may enter a Preparation for Adult Living Program group home. As they age and become more capable of independent living, the youth move to a transitioning living apartment until they ultimately receive financial assistance for housing at age 18.⁴⁷

The [Youth Housing Assistance Program](#) (YHAP) in **Illinois** uses Chafee dollars to provide a range of services to transitioning foster youth who are at high risk of becoming homeless. Youth ages 17 ½ to 21 receive assistance from one of 16 housing advocates across the state, which help youth locate housing, provide budget counseling, and help them connect to community resources and social services. Youth ages 18 to 21 are eligible for cash assistance, including:

- start-up grants of up to \$800 (\$1200 if a youth is parenting, pregnant, or disabled) to cover start-up costs such as deposits, furniture, and appliances;
- partial housing subsidies of up to \$100/month for one year following emancipation (when housing costs exceed 30 percent of income);
- emergency cash assistance for housing security deposits, rent, partial rental subsidies, furniture, appliances, utilities, and other items needed to help youth avoid or manage a crisis (Qualifying youth may receive up to \$2,000 in their first 12 months after emancipation or \$600 if they lose a job and need to pay rent before another job is secured, with a lifetime maximum of \$4,000).⁴⁸

New Jersey's Department of Human Services has joined the Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency to provide transitional housing to youth aging out of foster care. Using tax bonds, the Housing Finance Agency funds and develops transitional housing projects specifically for youth leaving foster care. The Department of Human Resources Division of Youth and Family Services refers foster youth to housing and provides rental assistance to those who are receiving support services through the agency.

While renting is often the most practical housing option for former foster youth, some efforts have been made to help them become homeowners. At least two Atlanta-area youth have used funds from their Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative IDA accounts to pay for the down-payment on homes.⁴⁹

Youth Engagement and Leadership

States can improve services for foster youth by engaging current and former foster youth in the planning and implementation of programs that serve them. By hearing first-hand from foster youth, policymakers gain a better understanding of the challenges and needs of foster youth and programs and policies that could assist them. Further, such opportunities empower youth to assume greater responsibility for their well-being, promote civic participation, and help youth develop leadership and communication skills.

States can:

- solicit youth input by appointing youth representatives to policy, planning, and oversight bodies;
- involve youth in the design and provision of training programs for social workers and foster home parents;

Fifteen Statements from the Michigan Youth Board

1. Foster youth should be part of the decision-making process every time there is a change in placement.
2. The state should develop strategies that help foster youth maintain positive connections with their birth families and hometown friends.
3. The state should provide support that will connect every foster youth age 14 or older with a mentor or other caring adult in their lives.
4. Foster youth should always receive an allowance for their own personal use.
5. The state should develop a savings account for each youth in care over age 14 and contribute to the account for each year the youth is in care.
6. The state should make it possible for every foster youth to get a driver's license.
7. Youth in care should have a certified copy of a birth certificate, Social Security card, and state photo ID. Youth 14 and older should have their own personal copy as well as one in our file.
8. The state should recruit more foster homes for teens, with foster parents who like and understand teens.
9. Youth panels should be included in all foster parent training.
10. Foster youth should be entitled to transportation to after school events and social gatherings.
11. Foster youth should be allowed, and supported, to attend the religious services of their own choice.
12. All foster youth should be entitled to free tuition at any state college or community college.
13. Foster youth should have priority for free or low cost items (cars, computers, etc.) at state auctions.
14. Every effort should be made to ensure foster youth enter the system through child welfare, if appropriate, instead of juvenile justice.
15. Foster youth should be eligible for Medicaid until their 21st birthday. They should be given the option of remaining in state care until 21, instead of being dropped at 18.

Source: Voice, 2003.

http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/docs/michigan_voice.pdf

- develop formal mechanisms such as surveys or focus groups to collect feedback from foster youth;
- sponsor state conventions for foster youth and their families;
- create youth boards charged with developing recommendations on how to improve policies and programs; and establish a point person who can help youth address their complaints and concerns.

In **California**, Senate Bill 933 established the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsman to advocate for the interests of children and youth in foster care, provide an avenue for foster children and youth to file complaints without fear of retribution, act as an independent forum for the investigation and resolution of complaints, make referrals, educate youth and children about their rights, and maintain a toll-free telephone number that state's foster children and youth can call to express their concerns.⁵⁰ Each year, the Ombudsman's Office compiles all the complaints received and reports them to the state legislature. Over half the staff members at the Ombudsman's Office are former foster youth.

The **Tennessee** Youth Advisory Council (TYAC) advocates for foster youth to have a voice in decisions and opportunities that affect them. The council has made housing, foster care recruitment and parenting, education, employment, and job training its top priorities. TYAC members meet monthly and regularly speak to community leaders, policymakers, and child welfare officials about their concerns. In addition, the council offers support and information to Tennessee foster youth through [a website](#) that provides information on programs and services; advice on health care access and educational and work opportunities; an online forum to connect with other foster youth; and descriptions of leadership opportunities through TYAC membership.⁵¹

In Michigan, the State Youth Policy Board, an active and highly effective group of leaders from 13 youth boards across the state, advises the Michigan Department of Human Services on all policies and practices that affect current and former foster youth. In 2005, the board developed a list of priorities (*see box – “Fifteen Statements from the Michigan Youth Board”*) and produced a report titled *VOICE: Discussing Issues and Concerns of Michigan Foster Youth*. As a result, the group was invited to meet with the governor and her cabinet. The board continues to provide regular feedback to the DHS director and her executive management team.⁵²

As the Michigan Youth Leadership Board's statements demonstrate, foster youth often advocate for policies that will allow them to experience normal teenage activities, such as learning to drive, acquiring a driver's license, staying overnight at friends' homes or on school trips, having money for sports uniforms, and receiving an allowance. This focus on “normalcy” is a good example of the unique perspectives that foster youth can bring to the table.

Cross-System Approaches to Better Serve Foster Youth in Transition

Several states have begun to develop comprehensive systems that seamlessly connect child welfare with other youth-serving systems, such as workforce development and mental health. The

cross-system efforts aim to ensure access to and easier navigation of a richer array of services for current and former foster youth.

In North Carolina, the state created a multi-agency collaborative to implement recommendations of a 1996 evaluation of independent living services. The collaborative coordinates and prioritizes funding and services for youth in transition. Participants include staff from independent living, mental health, workforce development, juvenile justice, vocational rehabilitation, and housing agencies as well as private service providers for foster youth and, most important, foster youth themselves.

The collaborative renamed the state independent living program [NC LINKS](#)⁵³ and incorporated the evaluation's recommendations into its policies, training, and practice to make improvements system-wide. The collaborative:

- created better training of NC LINKS staff and foster parents;
- required counties to apply for funds and develop a county service plan every year;
- tapped unused independent living funds to establish a trust fund to help provide aftercare services for teens who left care after age 16; and
- incorporated youth development principles into child welfare policy.

Through these efforts, North Carolina has created an outcome-focused approach to serving foster youth in their transition to adulthood. The goals for every foster youth are safe and stable housing, sufficient income, adequate education and vocational training, avoidance of high-risk behavior, postponement of parenthood, a personal support network of five or more caring adults, and access to necessary medical, dental, and mental health care. NC LINKS is tracking outcomes in each of these areas and holds counties accountable for meeting local outcome goals. The state has seen improvements in outcomes since they began tracking in 2000 in the areas of housing, earnings, job stability, educational and vocational training, and personal support systems.

Another unique component of NC LINKS is the \$400,000 trust fund set up by the state—prior to the establishment of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program—to cover allowable expenditures on behalf of the youth. The Independent Living Trust Fund consists of unspent federal funds provided under the old Independent Living Initiative.⁵⁴ These funds supplement the \$2.1 million budget for independent living services and can fill gaps in necessary services for individual youth, such as tutoring, as well as school items, such as sneakers for sports. In school settings where there is pressure to be involved in activities, this puts foster youth on a level playing field with their peers and helps them feel “normal.” Older foster youth transitioning to independent living may use these funds for housing needs or emergency assistance.

The NC LINKS collaborative plans to expand its efforts. For example, the program has convened a formal collaboration between the WIA One-Stop Career Centers and local child welfare agencies, and coordinates employment and training programs to fill gaps in services to foster youth in their local areas.⁵⁵

Similar to North Carolina, the **Utah** Department of Human Services (DHS) is spearheading a statewide initiative to transform Utah's independent living services, Transition to Adult Living (TAL), into a comprehensive, cross-system program for foster youth. The initiative began in the summer of 2003 when the state held two summits with foster youth to gain their input on their needs and guidance on how TAL could better meet these needs. In addition, the state compared the outcomes of foster youth in Utah to those of other youth, and officials were alarmed by the high rates of criminal activity, early child-bearing, receipt of public assistance, mortality, and unemployment. After attending one of the summits, the governor made the transformation of independent living services for foster youth one of her priority initiatives.

The governor assigned an implementation team to develop a comprehensive state system serving current and former foster youth in 14-month turnaround time. The members of this team came from the governor's office and the division of child and family services, department of workforce services, public and higher education, department of health, and community and economic development. This team also participated in and received technical assistance from the NGA Center for Best Practices Policy Academy on Cross-Systems Innovation.

Such a rigorous schedule for completion and accountability to the governor meant the team had to move forward on making improvements and implementing new policies while planning for long-term systemic changes across systems. Key accomplishments include:

- Creating a formalized partnership with the Department of Workforce Services, giving foster youth priority for WIA youth services and training the local workforce development areas in serving foster youth. The Department of Workforce Services will also be administering the ETV program.
- Developing an ongoing marketing/information initiative for foster youth, which offers the youth and their caregivers bimonthly mailings on pertinent TAL information. The department also created a resource and information [Web site](#), *Just for Youth*, with special pages that provide information for current and former foster youth.
- Implementing a new policy that requires foster youth to complete an Ansell-Casey Life Skill Assessment each year. The assessment measures and tracks their acquisition of skills and knowledge needed to live independently.
- Establishing a flexible Transitional Support Fund to help prepare and assist older foster youth in their transition. The funds can provide assistance in education, training, career exploration, physical and mental health, emotional support, transportation, and housing.
- Earmarking low-income housing for youth transitioning out of foster care.
- Establishing practice guidelines that give youth the opportunity to complete driver's education and obtain a driver's license prior to aging out of foster care.
- Implementing several pilot projects, including two mentoring programs and a program with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, to help foster youth address their mental health needs.

- Creating an evaluation process that enables tracking of services received and outcomes for foster youth to help gauge the effectiveness of TAL. Interviews with a sample of foster youth ages 16 and older in 2005 helped to create the baseline.


The implementation team has also continued to hold foster youth summits and created youth councils to ensure it receives ongoing feedback on the initiative and the work that still needs to be accomplished. The implementation team is now concentrating on long-term strategies for TAL as a comprehensive system for foster youth. These strategies aim to create a client-focused vision for DHS personnel, as well as its partners at the state and local levels. In addition, TAL is providing training to local providers serving foster youth so the state can turn over more responsibility for implementing this vision to them.

In January of 2006, **Michigan** convened an inter-departmental task force to focus on serving at-risk youth transitioning to adulthood. The Director of the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) and a Michigan Supreme Court Justice co-chaired the taskforce, which included representatives from the Departments of Labor and Economic Growth, Education, Community Health, Mental Health and Housing; private child placement agencies; state foundations; the United Way; tribal councils; community colleges; community mental health boards; youth advocacy groups; and associations of foster and adoptive parents. Each of the six taskforce subcommittees on education, employment, permanency, housing, mental health, and health was co-chaired by a member of the State Foster Youth Policy Board. As a result of the taskforce and other work of DHS, in spring 2006, NGA selected Michigan as one of six states to participate in its Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care.

The taskforce released the "[Interdepartmental Task Force on Service to At-Risk Youth Transitioning to Adulthood](#)" report to the Michigan Legislature on September 30, 2006. The report includes 21 initiatives with specific strategies and activities to improve outcomes for young people aging out of foster care. The state has implemented or is in the process of implementing a number of these strategies.

- The state launched a Web site in February 2007. The Web site, designed with input from foster care youth, will serve as a useful and accessible source of information about housing, educational vouchers, life skills training, important documents, and transportation.
- Youth will be automatically referred to Michigan Works! Agencies, which oversee a wide variety of programs designed to help employers find skilled workers, help job seekers find careers, and prepare youth and unskilled adults for entry into the labor force.
- The Department of Labor and Economic Growth requested a federal waiver to develop different evaluation criteria when serving foster youth. Although the waiver was denied, there is general agreement to consider different factors for all participants to ensure the local agencies meet standards. Workforce Investment Boards have already set youth in transition as a priority.

- A Youth Permanency Conference, scheduled for April 2007, will serve as an opportunity to bring caseworkers and supervisors from public and private agencies together to share the importance of developing improved services and tools to assist young people in developing life long connections.
- The Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSDHA) has allocated \$3 million dollars to fund projects for homeless youth ages 18 to 24. MSDHA has announced the recipients of the grant awards serving 55 counties. Services are anticipated to begin in April 2007.
- The state is opening a Housing Resource Center, a two-year pilot that would provide referrals, information and rent subsidies for 50–60 former foster youth in Wayne County. DHS has agreed to fund one FTE who will be at the housing center and coordinate services and link youth to services.
- DHS in collaboration with Campus Compact will hold an Educational Summit on April 19, 2007. The summit will include representatives from a majority of colleges, universities, and community colleges in the state. Foster care youth will present their challenges with the goal of enlisting colleges to provide financial, social, and educational support.

Other strategies will focus on such issues as promoting healthy behaviors and lifestyles, expanding dental coverage, facilitating continuing llment in Medicaid, increasing access to mental health services, and providing opportunities for training and mentoring.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, the availability of new federal funds and research findings has prompted states to improve programs and services for youth transitioning out of foster care. As a result, a number of promising strategies are emerging across the nation. To improve the prospects of foster youth, governors can:

- ***Ensure that youth transitioning out of foster care have access to a comprehensive array of programs and services that address their permanency, health, economic, life skills, and housing needs.*** To achieve this goal, states can expand the breadth and duration of certain public services for foster youth. For example, states can expand Medicaid coverage for foster youth until age 21, set aside sufficient funding to take full advantage of the four-to-one federal match for the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, or expand their Chafee programs to serve youth up to 21 years old.
- ***Create opportunities for foster youth to provide input through policy and planning bodies, youth boards, and similar mechanisms.*** Such opportunities improve services by providing useful feedback from those most affected by state policies and programs and, at the same time, give youth a chance to develop leadership and communication skills.
- ***Develop policies and partnerships that seamlessly connect child welfare with other youth-serving systems.*** Cross-system efforts like those in North Carolina and Utah make

it easier for youth to access and navigate services and help states realize greater efficiencies by aligning resources and priorities.

- ***Leverage additional resources by engaging the business, volunteer, and philanthropic communities.*** Governors can ask businesses to sponsor internships and summer jobs, urge volunteers to act as mentors, or tap into the philanthropic sector for funding support for asset development programs.

By improving state policies, engaging foster youth, working across agencies and systems, and better leveraging resources, states can transform their foster care systems to improve the effectiveness of programs serving youth leaving the foster care system and at-risk youth in general.

This *Issue Brief* was written by Lauren Eyster and Sarah Looney Oldmixon, with funding support from the Freddie Mac Foundation and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

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