



IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG ADULTS and the Systems that Serve Them

A PLAYBOOK OF BEST PRACTICES





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The latest statistics show there are approximately 343,077 children and youth in the custody of state child welfare systems across the United States — placed in foster homes, group homes, or residential facilities. While overall entries and exits from foster care have been declining, more than 55,000 of those in care were over the age of 16, including young adults in extended foster care. At the same time, around 16,000 young people aged out of the system, joining the growing number of former foster youth across the country.

State and federal leaders are working to improve outcomes for the nation's foster children in many ways. There is a focus on providing intensive prevention/reunification services to strengthen and support families so children can avoid the trauma of family separation entirely or be reunited with family quickly if out-of-home care is needed. At the same time, there is a recognition that providing support and resources to young people who turn 18 in foster care and in the first critical years of early adulthood is needed to help young people fulfill their potential.

We know this group faces critical challenges, including barriers to stable housing, access to basic assistance, opportunities for quality jobs and consistent educational support. Despite this, young adults who experienced foster care demonstrate remarkable resilience, adaptability and strength.

In 2023, the National Collaborative for Transition-Aged Youth was formed by three leading organizations involved in helping young adults who experienced foster care — American Public Human Services Association, FosterClub and Youth Villages. The goal of the National Collaborative is to bring stakeholders together to work toward

transforming child welfare policies, services and support with a focus on improving outcomes for young people ages 16 to 26 who are currently in or leaving the country's child welfare systems.

The National Collaborative is made up of young people with lived experience in foster care, public state and county level child welfare leaders, national advocates and partners who worked together to build this playbook — a detailed resource for change.

Six virtual meetings and two in-person sessions were used to gather insight from young people and others who joined the effort. The group reviewed current best practices and model standards of care that address the unique needs of this population. The process included an analysis of data, feedback sessions and collective learning. The result is this document: *Improving Outcomes for Young Adults and the Systems that Serve Them: A Playbook of Best Practices*.

At the heart of this work is the voice and expertise of young people who experienced foster care and child welfare systems firsthand. It is not just a document about young people — it is a resource co-designed with them, to guide practitioners, agencies and policymakers at every level to better serve and support them.

Their insight helped shape the playbook's structure, themes and recommendations. Their role was central in:

- Defining the core principles that should guide all policies and practices affecting engagement and service delivery with older youth and young adults.
- Providing firsthand accounts and recommendations to ensure the playbook reflects the challenges and strengths of young people.
- Informing the development of practical tools and resources that are accessible and youth centered.
- Challenging outdated policies and advocating for opportunity, shared power and choice in service delivery.

The voices of young people who participate in the National Collaborative or who have important insight are included in every section of the playbook.

Inside, readers will find the core themes and practical tools that emerged from this collaboration. Each section focuses on a fundamental area of support for young people moving through the child welfare system, such as employment, housing, permanency and health.

“ *Working with the National Collaborative has been one of the best experiences of my professional career. I was continually amazed by the passion, intelligence, hard work, dedication and engagement of the incredible lived experience experts in our workgroup. I am inspired to work harder and do more just by having worked with this wonderful collection of committed professionals.”*

TODD SERPICO

DIVISION ADMINISTRATOR OF TRANSITIONAL LIVING SERVICES, TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES

These sections address the essential needs identified by young people, recognizing the unique challenges and potential of everyone in care. In all, the playbook includes nearly 100 examples of best practices for work with transition-age youth and 35 policy and practice recommendations specific to each domain of a young person's life.

The playbook concludes with eight overarching priorities for state and federal elected officials and policymakers:

- Co-design systems and programs centered on shared power with young people.
- Prioritize prevention services for older youth.
- Increase John H. Chafee Foster Care Program funding.
- Expand Medicaid eligibility and support through age 26.
- Invest in affordable housing and flexible housing assistance.
- Promote interagency collaboration.
- Create flexible funding mechanisms.
- Maximize Title IV-E Extended Foster Care.

This playbook is meant as a guidepost for child welfare agencies, policymakers and advocates committed to improving outcomes for transition-age youth. By working together, sharing insights and remaining adaptable, we can all drive meaningful change and elevate the voices of youth.

We hope the playbook empowers practical improvements in support. It shares solutions that can be implemented across the nation to enhance outcomes for young people served by child welfare systems.



CORE PRINCIPLES

The core principles outlined in this playbook are the result of a collaborative co-design process with leaders who have lived experience with the foster care system and bring firsthand knowledge of the unique strengths, challenges, barriers and opportunities faced by young people who are involved with or transitioning from child welfare systems.

Their insight, experiences and perspectives were instrumental in shaping and defining these principles to ensure they genuinely reflect the needs, aspirations and priorities of young adults. They've emphasized true support goes beyond providing basic services; it involves creating an environment where they feel valued, empowered and understood. By centering the voices of lived experience leaders, these principles aim to capture the essence of what matters most to these emerging adults: the chance to have control over their lives, build trusting relationships and access fair opportunities that help them thrive.

These principles serve as a foundation for any individual, organization or system seeking to improve outcomes for young people involved with child welfare systems.

They provide a clear, youth-centered guide for creating supportive environments, developing policies and implementing practices that promote a sense of belonging, safety and growth. This approach ensures the voices of those who experienced the child welfare system remain at the forefront of efforts to transform the foster care and emerging adulthood experience, making sure it is one that fosters hope, resilience and opportunity.

By embracing these core principles, stakeholders can work together to build pathways to success that honor the individuality, potential and resilience of every young person. These principles are not just guidelines — they represent a commitment to creating a future where all young people, regardless of their past, have the chance to thrive and succeed in the way that represents their voice.

The National Collaborative believes these core principles are fundamental. We are committed to fostering trust, promoting choice and prioritizing collaboration, as we believe these elements are essential to creating meaningful and lasting change.

Trust

Definition: Being able to rely on others, knowing they will be consistent, dependable and honest.



Why It's Important: Trust is not easily given in foster care, as many young people have experienced betrayal, neglect or abandonment. Individuals who experienced instability often struggle with trusting others. When trust is established, it can empower foster youth to heal, grow and build healthy relationships in the future. Building trust is essential for them to be comfortable engaging with systems and adults in their lives. When they know they can trust those around them, they are more likely to seek support and be open about their needs.

Choice

Definition: Having the power to make informed decisions about their own life, including their goals and day-to-day activities.



Why It's Important: Young people involved with the child welfare system often feel decisions are made for them rather than with them. Having choices gives them autonomy and control over their own lives, which builds confidence and independence.

Collaboration

Definition: Working together with external supporters, like coaches, mentors and other adults, to create plans and solutions that reflect their input and desires.



Why It's Important: Young people involved with the child welfare system benefit from being active participants in decisions about

their lives. When they collaborate with others, they are invested in the outcomes and respected as partners in their own care. Collaboration also leads to more effective, individualized plans.

Empowerment

Definition: Equipping young people with the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to take control of their lives and advocate for themselves.



Why It's Important: Many young people involved with the child welfare system have experienced situations where they felt powerless. Empowerment is about restoring and promoting autonomy, enabling them to advocate for their needs, set goals and pursue opportunities on their own terms.

Community

Definition: Belonging to a supportive network of people who understand, accept and stand by them as they navigate life's challenges.



Why It's Important: Young people involved with child welfare systems often face isolation and a lack of consistent support. Building a community network of supportive relationships, resources and environments that foster a sense of belonging, safety and connection for those in foster care helps them feel and be connected, supported and an important part of a group. A strong community provides mentorship, emotional and practical support.

Security

Definition: The assurance of stability and continuity in their living conditions, personal safety and financial well-being. For those involved with the child welfare system, security means they have consistent support systems in place, free from the fear of sudden displacement, financial instability or harmful environments. Security also includes the peace of mind that comes with having and knowing the legal rights and protections to safeguard their future.

Why It's Important: Security is essential because it provides the foundation young people need to thrive as they enter adulthood. Without a sense of security — whether in housing, employment, emotional or personal safety — young people often experience anxiety, uncertainty and instability, which can hinder their ability to focus on building their futures. Security ensures they can concentrate on pursuing education, employment and personal growth without worrying about their basic needs.



Safety

Definition: A state of having both physical and emotional security, characterized by safety from harm and protection, as well as an environment free from judgment or criticism.

Why It's Important: Young people involved with child welfare systems often come from backgrounds of trauma, neglect or instability. Feeling safe is crucial for their emotional and physical healing. Safety provides a foundation upon which they can begin to trust others and focus on personal growth and development.



Well-being

Definition: Having a healthy, balanced life, including mental, emotional and physical health, and financial security to meet basic needs. It is important to note that basic needs are personalized both to the individual and to specific communities, such as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) youth (e.g., hair care).

Why It's Important: Well-being encompasses more than just survival — it's about thriving. Young people involved with child welfare systems deserve access to resources that support their overall health and happiness, meet cultural and spiritual needs, and help them manage stress, maintain stable housing, pursue education and achieve personal growth.



Permanency

Definition: Permanency is not just about reuniting with family, finding a permanent home or long-term placement — it's about having a reliable support system to turn to when needed. It's a network of connections, like the branches of a tree, young people can rely on for guidance, resources and emotional support. These connections, built over time, foster a sense of consistency and trust that can evolve into deeper relationships. Permanency is about young people having a "Plan B" or a shoulder to lean on, knowing there are people who will show up when they need help.

Why It's Important: Permanency offers young adults the security to navigate life's challenges without fear of isolation. It allows them to take risks, make mistakes and learn from their experiences, knowing they have a safety net of people and resources to catch



them. Permanency is not a one-time solution; it's an ongoing process of building and sustaining relationships that provide support and opportunities for growth. Young adults benefit from having permanent connections that help them access housing, employment, education and emotional well-being. These connections empower them to become self-sufficient, while still offering the freedom to seek help when needed.

Relationships

Definition: Forming deep, positive connections within themselves and with people who care about them and who provide emotional, social and practical support that fosters self-confidence.

Why It's Important: Young people involved with the child welfare system require healthy relationships that are genuine and enduring. Healthy and secure relationships provide emotional support and help young adults build trust, learn social skills and feel understood. Relationships are essential for building a meaningful, fulfilled life. Strong and secure relationships help young people make healthy romantic and personal connections in life that reflect their individual values that help prevent domestic violence or toxic relational patterns.



Respect

Definition: Being treated with dignity, fairness and kindness, where their experiences and perspectives are valued and taken seriously.

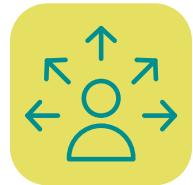
Why It's Important: Young people want to be treated as individuals with unique perspectives, not just as part of the system. Feeling respected fosters self-worth and encourages them to take an active role in their own lives. Respect is key to building trust and collaboration.



Opportunity

Definition: Ensuring all young people have access to resources, opportunities and support tailored to their individual circumstances and experiences to help them overcome the specific challenges they face.

Why It's Important: Every young person needs access to the tailored support necessary to succeed, recognizing each journey is unique. This allows everyone a chance to reach their full potential.





EMBRACING THE IMPACT OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

Young people involved in child welfare systems bring with them a wide range of experiences shaped by their unique journeys — whether they spent a brief period in foster care, were reunified, adopted, found permanency with a kinship caregiver or aged out of the system. These experiences profoundly influence their strengths, challenges, needs and aspirations as they move into adulthood.

The playbook was developed with that in mind. It is designed to be relevant and useful across the full spectrum of experiences within the child welfare system. It is grounded in the understanding that every journey is valid and valuable, and all young people deserve access to resources, community connections and opportunities to thrive. Importantly, thriving is self-defined and individualized.

Engaging Individuals with Lived Experience

For policymakers and practitioners, it is essential to meaningfully engage young people with lived experience when developing solutions to systemic challenges. It is essential to co-develop a shared vision that aligns with the goals and aspirations of both the organization and the young people involved.

The principle of “nothing about us without us” serves as a powerful, necessary frame in shaping programs, initiatives and laws that bring systemic change. It underscores the necessity of including young people at decision-making tables, not merely as participants, but as partners.

“ We could sit in a room and talk for hours about [how to change the system]. As we tackle the problems we’re tackling now, new problems will come up. You can’t put a timeline on this. It’s constantly evolving.”

CHARISSA KEEBAUGH, AGE 21

WASHINGTON STATE
LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

True power sharing demands a shift in narrative and a willingness to embrace change. While a young person is in the child welfare system, they may have limited agency in shaping their own lives. Some were never asked, “What do you want?” and many lacked the support needed to pursue their life goals. Choice is a core principle for this very reason. Recognizing and nurturing their inherent strengths requires intentional investment of time, attention and resources.

When power is shared through a youth-adult partnership model, young people are empowered to advise, lead and co-create sustainable change. This model complements and enhances ongoing improvements within the system.



Sit at our seats, come to our table, instead of us always having to come to yours.”

NATALIE CLARKE, AGE 26

UTAH LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

To create a system rooted in lasting transformation, we must change the narrative of success for transition-age youth from simply surviving to thriving in the life they envision for themselves. These young people did not choose their circumstances; they deserve every opportunity to succeed, to thrive, on their own terms.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are more resources and tools for engaging people with lived experience.

[A Guide to Co-Creating with People with Lived Experience](#)

[FosterClub's Ladder of Engagement](#)

[Pyramid of Youth Engagement](#)

[A Starter Kit on Engaging People with Lived Experience in Child Support Programs](#)

[The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)

[Family Voices United Constituent Voice Assessment Tool](#)

[Quick Guide to Youth Engagement](#)

[FosterClub's Strategic Sharing Model](#)



SECTION 1

EDUCATION— A CRUCIAL ROLE

Connecting to the Core Principles



OPPORTUNITY



COLLABORATION

Education plays a crucial role in preparing young people to thrive as adults, with academic achievement and vocational training serving as gateways to greater success.

Several states implemented programs to mitigate financial barriers and provide hands-on support to help former foster youth achieve their educational goals. Many organizations offer programs providing young people with the necessary support and resources not only to commence educational programs but also to complete them.

EXAMPLE

State College Tuition Waiver Program

Approximately 31 states implemented waiver programs that cover the cost of post-secondary education for youth who were in foster care. Texas, Pennsylvania and Florida are among states offering waivers. These programs help ensure financial barriers do not prevent youth from accessing higher education, thus increasing their opportunities for gainful employment.

“ Supporting post-secondary attainment for transition-aged youth who experienced foster care is our responsibility as states and as a child welfare system. These young people are smart, driven and have big dreams. However, we know the impact of systems involvement means this is a demographic educationally delayed relative to their peers and who often lack the familial support system their peers have. It’s not just a moral responsibility we have to these young people; it is a benefit to our states to provide a more educated and skilled workforce to build better futures for our communities.”

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OF FAMILY AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES



ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- **Texas Education Agency — Foster Care & Support Services** — Texas provides various educational support services for foster youth, including the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program and a state college tuition waiver. The ETV program offers financial assistance to help young people cover the costs of education and training, while the tuition waiver eliminates tuition and fees at Texas state-supported colleges and universities. Additionally, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides resources and guidance to schools to support foster care students.
- **Tuition Waivers** — Texas also offers tuition waivers for foster youth, helping them pursue higher education without the financial burden that can often deter them from academic success. Young people who use the waivers are 3.5 times more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree than those who don't use them. Texas' waiver does not expire, letting former foster youth finish or start educational programs at any time during their life and not just during their early 20s.
- **Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS)** — Florida's PESS program is available to former foster youth who completed high school or an equivalent credential and are enrolled in a post-secondary education program. PESS provides a monthly stipend of \$1,720

to help cover housing and utility costs. Payments are made directly to housing and utility providers, and any remaining funds are disbursed to the young person.

- **Grand Canyon University (GCU) Foster Youth Program** — GCU offers former foster youth specific scholarships and waives out-of-state tuition fees, making higher education more accessible for those who were involved in foster care nationwide. Through its Fostering Futures initiative, GCU provides comprehensive support, including mentorship and academic resources, to foster youth seeking to pursue college degrees.

Specialized Programs

Tuition waivers enable young people with experience in child welfare systems to begin higher education or skilled vocational training. Still, many encounter barriers to completing those programs. Some specialized programs have shown success in increasing a young person's chances of graduation or receiving a technical or trade certificate or license.

EXAMPLE

LifeSet Scholars

This Youth Villages program serves young people in eight states, helping them complete postsecondary academic or vocational programs. Participants receive educational and vocational support, a mentor, technology resources and a monthly stipend. The program provided monthly stipends totaling \$869,400 in 2024 for young people. It has helped more than 400 participants since 2010 and has a graduation rate of 48%, compared to the 13% national graduation rates for transition-age youth without support.

“ *When I found out about the educational training voucher, my options began to broaden. I could pick the in-state school I wanted because I would have more financial assistance.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT



ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- **Guardian Scholars** — Programs in many areas including [Iowa](#), [Colorado](#) and [San Diego](#) offer financial and other support to young people who have experienced foster care
- **SUN Scholars** — Founded in Connecticut with a national mission, SUN Scholars is an organization committed to the advancement of higher education for students of the foster and adopted community. Staffed entirely by individuals with lived experience in foster care, SUN offers academic coaching, mentorship and career guidance.
- **Seita Scholars** — The Seita Scholars Program is a campus-based support program that provides coaching and programming to college students with lived experience in foster care at Western Michigan University.
- **Winston Rhea Scholars** — Serving Louisiana and South Carolina, this organization offers a high-touch intensive coaching/mentorship program that includes post-high school goal setting and financial support.

Call to Action

Completion of higher education and skilled vocational training levels the adult playing field for young people who experienced foster care. Every young person should have the opportunity to complete the education and training they need to qualify for jobs that pay living wages and can support their families and futures.

Policymakers should ensure former foster youth have the resources and support needed to not only enter higher education and training programs but to also complete them.

Key Actions to Drive Education Forward

- **Expand and Strengthen the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program** — The ETV program provides up to \$5,000 annually for post-secondary education to eligible foster youth. Increased funding, simplified application processes and improved outreach to young people would enable more access to the funds.
- **Improve Academic Preparation and College Readiness** — Foster youth often face disrupted schooling and lack access to college prep courses. Before they turn 18, they should have funded access to tutoring, mentoring and dual-enrollment programs to bridge academic gaps.
- **Extend Foster Care Support Beyond Age 18** — The Fostering Connections Act allows states to extend foster care to age

21 for youth enrolled in post-secondary education, but many foster youth take longer to finish bachelor's degrees because of early educational gaps. Continued housing, healthcare and case management support during college years is critical. Tennessee and Idaho recently became the first states to extend foster care support to age 23, allowing many students to retain support throughout their senior year of college.

- **Create Campus and Community Support Programs** — Programs like Seita and LifeSet Scholars provide comprehensive services to young people as they enter and complete academic or vocational programs. Policymakers should consider replicating successful models in their jurisdictions.
- **Enhance Data Collection and Program Evaluation** — More rigorous tracking of foster youth outcomes in higher education is needed to inform policy. The John H. Chafee Program mandates evaluation of innovative programs; research should be expanded.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are resources and tools on education.

[Supporting Success – Casey Family Programs](#)

[Supporting College Students Transitioning Out of Foster Care \(ACF Report\)](#)

[A New Approach to Help Youth Aging Out of Foster Care – Congressional White Paper](#)

SECTION 2

EMPLOYMENT — THE PATH TO SUCCESS IN ADULTHOOD

Employment for transition-age youth is more than just a job; it is a pivotal step toward self-sufficiency and personal and professional growth. For young people in or aging out of foster care, securing meaningful employment provides financial stability, a sense of purpose and the opportunity to develop valuable skills. It is an essential part of building a stable future.

Many young people face challenges in accessing employment due to gaps in education, lack of professional networks or the instability experienced while in care. A stable job creates a sense of accomplishment and autonomy, enabling young adults to make life decisions with confidence. Those with lived experience in the child welfare system frequently highlight how employment and financial literacy education help them establish independence and escape the cycle of poverty.

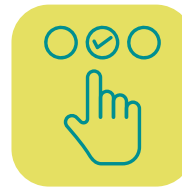
Moreover, employment introduces a network of peers, mentors and colleagues who can provide guidance, support and professional connections. Having a community in the workplace helps young adults to feel supported and less isolated, giving them a sense of belonging that might be missing from other areas of their lives

Those with lived experience in the child welfare system encounter unique barriers, including lack of experience, limited social capital and trauma histories. Employment programs for

Connecting to the Core Principles



EMPOWERMENT



CHOICE



COMMUNITY



OPPORTUNITY

them need to be structured to address these issues, offering tailored support to provide them with an opportunity for success.

Young people frequently express the need for employment programs tailored to their skills and needs, enabling them to thrive independently. They require choices in the types of jobs or careers they pursue. It is essential that employment opportunities align with their interests and strengths, allowing them to build a meaningful and rewarding career path. Providing choice fosters autonomy and empowers them to take ownership of their futures.

“ Getting my first job was when I finally felt like I had control over my life. It wasn’t just about money — it was about proving to myself that I could make it on my own.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADER

Implementation: Employment Support

Many public child welfare agencies, educational institutions and workforce programs are implementing innovative strategies to support foster youth in navigating the job market, attaining educational goals and finding stable employment.

Young people often face significant challenges successfully leaving school for the workforce, including limited access to career guidance, lack of work experience and difficulty navigating complex employment systems. For those without strong support networks these challenges are compounded by additional barriers such as financial insecurity, gaps in educational attainment and the absence of adult role models to provide mentorship. This critical period requires tailored resources and support to help them build confidence, develop professional skills and identify opportunities that match their aspirations, ensuring they are prepared to succeed in a competitive job market.

“ When I left care, I didn’t know where to start. Having someone guide me through job training and connect me with opportunities made all the difference.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADER

EXAMPLE

State Jobs

Pennsylvania and Minnesota shifted from strictly requiring educational qualifications to valuing lived experience in civil service and government positions. This approach helps young adults leverage their unique experiences to secure jobs and start their careers in public service, offering them stable employment options.

The shift to valuing lived experience alongside education for civil service and government positions reflects the core principle of empowerment. By recognizing the value of lived experience, these states empower those with child welfare experience to apply for jobs that can become stable, impactful careers even if they don’t meet all the education requirements. This approach acknowledges the practical skills and resilience young adults have developed, encouraging them to view their unique experiences as assets rather than barriers. It not only provides meaningful employment pathways but also validates the perspectives of young people, fostering their self-confidence as they contribute to public service.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLE

■ **iFoster Jobs Program** — The iFoster Jobs Program is an award-winning training, internship and employment placement initiative designed for transition-aged foster youth. It offers evidence-based, trauma-informed curriculum covering both hard and soft skills sought by employers. In four years, the program has assisted more than 500 foster youth in securing competitive, permanent employment in living wage jobs. Notably, most work an average of 30+ hours a week while attending college or vocational schools, with a retention rate triple the industry average.

Specialized Career Services

Tailored career services are crucial for young adults, ensuring they receive personalized career guidance and job placement support.

EXAMPLE

Temple University in Pennsylvania —

Through its tailored career services, Temple University offers targeted support for foster youth, ensuring they receive individualized coaching, job search assistance and internship opportunities that align with their career aspirations.

The program empowers young people to explore career paths aligned with their unique goals and aspirations. This approach respects their personal ambitions and provides them with the resources needed to make informed decisions about their future. Empowering these emerging adults with choices in their career journey builds confidence, independence and control over their professional growth, which is essential for their long-term success.

Workforce Development Support and Innovation

Workforce development support is essential because it addresses critical barriers to employment and economic independence. This type of support provides tailored training, career counseling and job placement services, helping overcome challenges such as limited work experience, gaps in education and the absence of professional networks. Workforce development programs also equip young adults with essential skills like resume building, interview preparation and workplace etiquette, boosting their confidence and readiness for the job market. For those who experienced instability or trauma, this support offers a pathway to financial stability and self-sufficiency, ensuring they can achieve long-term success and thrive in adulthood. By fostering collaboration between workforce agencies, employers and child welfare systems, workforce development initiatives empower young people to build meaningful careers and create a strong foundation for their future.

EXAMPLE

In Georgia, foster youth automatically qualify for support under the **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act** (WIOA), providing them access to job training, career counseling and employment resources.

Through partnerships among workforce programs and community-based organizations, the program ensures young adults have the comprehensive support needed for workforce readiness. This collaborative approach fosters a network of support that includes diverse expertise and resources, empowering transition-age youth with the skills and connections they need to thrive in the job market. Through collaboration, the program creates a unified support system focused on youth success and long-term career stability.



ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- **Texas** — Through collaborative efforts among Texas workforce initiatives and community-based organizations, transition-age youth receive targeted workforce readiness support, preparing them to enter and succeed in the job market.
- **Avivo Youth Employment Services** — Based in Minneapolis and the Twin Cities metro area, this program offers several job and career training services at no cost to young people ages 14-24.
- **Just in Time for Foster Youth** — The Employment and Networking services offered by Just in Time for Foster Youth (JIT) aim to prepare young adults for meaningful employment through the Pathways to Financial Power program. This includes workshops on resumes, interviews, financial literacy and professional skills, along with networking and mentorship opportunities. The NEXTjobs initiative focuses on readiness for emerging jobs, trades and entrepreneurship. The program encourages continuous skill development and collaboration with San Diego professionals. Participation is open to young people in school or seeking employment.

“ I found myself in some pretty difficult situations that affected my overall academic performance and career. If anything, I just wish I had the knowledge and support to help navigate the basic concepts of being an adult such as managing finances and basic life skills, as well as the emotional support to help face challenges in an effective way.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Career Mentorship

Mentorship is a proven strategy for helping foster youth navigate the complexities of employment, offering guidance on everything from resume writing to professional behavior. Mentors not only provide practical advice but also serve as role models who inspire confidence and ambition in young people who may lack consistent adult support. By fostering trust and building meaningful relationships, mentors help them develop critical workplace skills, set career goals and connect to opportunities that align with their aspirations. For young people, mentorship offers a stable, empowering presence that can make a transformative difference in their journey toward independence and long-term success in the workforce.

EXAMPLES

- **Valley Youth House** — The Valley Youth House website offers programs focused on life skills and independent living for young people, particularly those who are leaving foster care or facing homelessness. Their services include workshops and resources that help participants develop essential skills such as financial literacy, job readiness and personal management. The goal is to empower young people to achieve self-sufficiency and successfully navigate adulthood.
- **The Cracked Pot Coffee Shop Mentorship Program** — When young people enter The Cracked Pot Program, they connect with the youth program director and a team of individuals who work with them from day one. This team includes a licensed therapist; a life coach, who helps them reach their program goals; and a mentor, who helps them become part of the Cracked Pot community. These individuals begin to bring a sense of normalcy and consistency to their lives.

- **Access 2 Jobs** — Access Inc. provides job skills training for young people aged 14-24, focusing on career planning, employability and overcoming barriers to employment. Services include mentorship, workshops, internships and support for education or certification programs. Specialized assistance is available for vulnerable groups, such as justice-involved, homeless and foster youth. Programs align personal goals with workforce needs, offering tailored pathways to success.
- **Earn and Learn** — The Earn and Learn program, sponsored by the University of Kentucky, helps former foster youth (ages 18-23) complete short-term vocational training for high-demand jobs. Participants receive tuition waivers, paid weekly wages and support from success coaches to navigate challenges. GED programs are also available for those without a high school diploma. Costs like books and supplies are covered, and training is through the Kentucky Community and Technical College System.
- **Youth Villages Job Prep Training Program** is a multi-week workshop that helps young adults in LifeSet learn the skills necessary to obtain and maintain stable employment. Participants are paired with volunteer job coaches and practice job related skills such as interviewing, resume writing, networking and more.

Call to Action

Employment is a steppingstone for young people involved with child welfare systems, providing financial stability, personal growth and a path to long-term success. Yet too many young adults face barriers to entering the workforce, including a lack of educational attainment, limited work experience and inadequate support networks. It is critical for public agencies, educational institutions, community-based organizations and policymakers to come together to remove these barriers and create more equitable opportunities for young people leaving foster care.

At the federal, state and local levels, we must implement a comprehensive, collaborative approach to employment support for youth.

Key Actions to Drive Employment Forward

- **Strengthen Federal Support for Employment Programs** — At the federal level, there is bipartisan recognition of the need to improve employment outcomes for transition-age foster youth. Programs like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood already prioritize youth employment, but we must expand these efforts to better serve foster youth.
- **Expand Public-Private Partnerships for Employment Opportunities** — Public and private sectors must work together to develop employment pipelines specifically designed for foster youth. Expanding public-private partnerships, particularly in high-demand industries like technology, healthcare and government, is a key strategy to ensure youth have access to stable, well-paying jobs.

■ **State Funding for Mentorship and Peer Support Programs** — Mentorship and peer support are critical for preparing foster youth to enter professional environments. Congress and state legislatures should allocate funds specifically for mentorship programs that connect foster youth with professionals who can offer guidance on career development and life skills.

■ **Create Long-Term Tracking and Data Sharing Initiatives** — To ensure accountability and track the success of employment programs, we need improved data collection and sharing across agencies. Congress can pass bipartisan legislation requiring states to collect data on employment outcomes for foster youth and report on program effectiveness.

Investing in the future employment of young people who experience foster care is not only a moral obligation but also an economic imperative. Young adults with stable, fulfilling employment are less likely to experience poverty, homelessness or involvement with the criminal justice system. By creating pathways to success through meaningful employment, we can break cycles of poverty, reduce dependency on public assistance and empower young people to build independent, prosperous lives.

Public and private agencies, businesses, educational institutions and policymakers must unite around a shared vision: a future where every transition-age foster youth has access to the resources, training and employment opportunities they need to thrive. The time to act is now. By making employment a priority in child welfare services, we can transform the future of foster youth across the nation.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are resources and tools on employment.

[Youth Employment Success \(YES\) Program](#)

[New Ways to Work](#)

[PRIDE Industries' Foster Youth Employment Services](#)

[National Youth Employment Coalition \(NYEC\)](#)

[U.S. Department of Labor – Employment for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care](#)

[The Foster Adoptive Alumni Network \(FAAN\)](#)



SECTION 3

PERMANENCY — BUILDING LIFELONG CONNECTIONS

Permanency, in relation to young adults with lived experience, refers to establishing long-term, stable and meaningful connections with supportive adults. Whether through reunification with family, adoption or lifelong relationships with mentors, permanency provides a sense of belonging and security. For those aging out of or otherwise involved with child welfare systems, permanency doesn't always mean legal permanency. It often means having at least one person they can count on unconditionally, long after they leave the system.

For young adults, permanency is about having the stability and emotional security needed to thrive. Many young people in foster or kinship care move through multiple placements, leading to disrupted relationships and a lack of trust in long-term connections. A permanent, stable figure in their lives gives them the emotional foundation they need to build resilience, confidence and hope for the future. Permanency creates a safety net, offering young people someone to turn to when life becomes challenging.

A sense of permanency gives young adults the emotional and physical safety to take risks, grow and pursue their goals. Knowing they have someone to turn to allows them to feel secure in exploring new opportunities without the fear of being abandoned or left alone.

Young people should have a voice in choosing who they view as permanent

Connecting to the Core Principles



TRUST



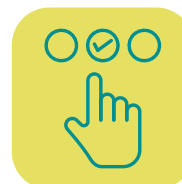
PERMANENCY



RELATIONSHIPS



SAFETY



CHOICE

figures in their lives. Permanency is most successful when young people have the agency to build relationships that are meaningful to them, whether through reuniting with family members, formal adoption, kinship care, or ongoing relationships with mentors or other supportive adults.

“ *I never thought I'd have someone in my life who stayed. When I found my mentor, it wasn't about paperwork; it was about knowing I had someone who would be there, no matter what.*

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT



Implementation: Innovations in Supporting Permanency

Public child welfare agencies, community-based organizations and policymakers are working together to provide prevention and reunification programs that reduce the need for or amount of time for youth to be in foster care. Those are frontline permanency efforts. Other efforts ensure transition-age youth have access to “Plan B” resources — support systems that give them a shoulder to lean on when needed, as well as a network of people and services they can turn to throughout their lives.

Youth Villages Intercept® Program Model

[Intercept](#) is an evidence-based comprehensive in-home service model that helps children birth to age 18 who are involved in child welfare, children’s mental health and juvenile justice programs and their families. Specialists help every member of the family, interact in the neighborhood and with children’s peers, providing 24-hour, in person crisis support for families. By providing intensive support to keep families safely together, leaders can reduce the number of children and youth who enter foster care, and that decreases the number who might later exit care without support.

Rigorous evaluations conducted by The Center for State Child Welfare Data at Chapin Hall showed that Intercept reduced the odds of out-of-home placement for children by 53% following the first maltreatment investigation. Compared to a matched group, the odds of achieving permanency were 24% higher with Intercept.

The program model has helped tens of thousands of youth and families across the country since 2006, is rated “Well-Supported” by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse and is eligible for matching funds for state implementation.

“ My family lives in Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh. I went to care in rural Georgia. It was very different, and it was very hard to try and do anything where I could stay connected with my family.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Supporting families so children can grow up safely in their own homes ensures those critical connections are not broken by time in foster care or other out-of-home placements. The program improves overall positive outcomes for young people involved with child welfare systems.

Kinship Navigator Programs

Kinship navigator programs are now being implemented by public child welfare agencies to connect young people to extended family members who can provide long-term, stable support. As of November 2024, seven kinship navigator programs have been found to be evidence-based by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse and are eligible to obtain 50% federal reimbursement of all programs, training and administrative costs to run the program:

- [30 Days to Family](#)
- [Arizona Kinship Support Services](#)
- [Colorado Kinconnected Kinship Navigator Program](#)
- [Florida Kinship Interdisciplinary Navigation Technologically-Advanced Model \(KIN-TECH™\)](#)
- [Ohio's Kinship Supports Intervention/ProtectOHIO](#)
- [Washington State Kinship Navigator Program](#)

Connecting young people with extended family members allows them to create a network of support for their entire life. The evidence-based kinship models emphasize the importance of these familial connections, ensuring these young adults have trusted individuals in their corner as they navigate the challenges of growing up and achieve permanency beyond legal arrangements.

Family Finding and Engagement Programs

Some states have pioneered [Family Finding Programs](#) that use technology and relational mapping to help locate and engage biological or extended family members. These programs aim to reconnect foster youth with relatives who can provide lifelong support and create stable adult connections.

Rebuilding these relationships can create a foundation of unconditional support, ensuring foster youth have a network they can rely on as emerging adults. These efforts underscore the importance of creating enduring, meaningful connections that provide both emotional stability and practical guidance.

EXAMPLE

[California's Family Finding Model](#) —

California's program uses data systems and search technologies to identify extended family members and reconnect young people with relatives who may offer permanency, thereby reducing the number of individuals aging out without family ties.

“It is through love that mentors can help raise the self-esteem, sense of security and overall awareness of the youth that will guide them and help them make decisions that reflect a love of self which they obtain through the love of another. The power of a mentor can't be touched.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Mentorship Models for Permanency

Recognizing the importance of non-legal forms of permanency, agencies are developing long-term mentorship programs that pair young people with committed adults who provide consistent support. These mentorships act as lifelong connections, giving young adults the stability of a permanent relationship even after they age out of foster care.

EXAMPLE

New York City's Mentoring for Permanency Initiative — This program matches young people aging out of foster care with mentors who commit to ongoing, consistent relationships, offering a critical safety net. These relationships not only offer guidance but also create a sense of belonging and support that young people can carry into adulthood. The program's focus on reliable, enduring mentorship reflects the transformative power of authentic connections in helping young people achieve their goals and navigate challenges.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

Casey Family Programs — Family search and engagement: Casey Family Programs provides strategies for identifying and engaging family members of children in foster care. These approaches include diligent searches, technology use and collaboration with extended families to strengthen connections and find permanency solutions. Resources and tools help caseworkers create meaningful, supportive relationships for children.

Wendy's Wonderful Kids — The Wendy's Wonderful Kids program, led by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, focuses on finding permanent, loving families for children in foster care, particularly those

hardest to place. It uses evidence-based, child-focused recruitment strategies and partners with adoption professionals nationwide. This program prioritizes older youth, sibling groups and children with special needs.

Youth-Centered Roundtable — The Youth-Centered Permanency Roundtables (YCPRT) program by Kinnect focuses on empowering foster youth aged 12 and older to actively participate in creating plans for lifelong connections and legal permanency. These meetings include support networks chosen by the young person, aiming to build a strong foundation for leaving foster care. The initiative targets those in child services custody for over a year.

Teen Parent Connection (TPC) — Georgia's TPC is a comprehensive support system designed to help teen mothers and fathers thrive as both parents and young adults. TPC serves pregnant or parenting teens (ages 13-19) who are in state custody, along with their children. It also supports teen parents whose children are in state custody, including those at risk of entering custody due to court involvement, family preservation cases or juvenile justice involvement.

Specialized Support Roles — Texas has hired housing and employment specialists to specifically address the unique needs of transition-age youth, improving their chances of long-term stability.

The OG Mentoring Program — Minnesota's Connections 2 Independence provides adult mentors to young adults, ages 18-24, through the OG program. Designed as an 18+ month commitment, the program encourages weekly phone check-ins and in-person meetings each month.

Primary Caring Adult (PCA) — This New Hampshire-based program emphasizes creating personalized plans for young

people aging out of care, focusing on education, employment, housing, health and connections. The form ensures collaboration between youth, caseworkers and support networks, promoting independence and stability.

Call to Action

Creating lasting connections and achieving permanency for transition-age youth is crucial to their long-term success and well-being. Permanency isn't only about legal arrangements like adoption; it's about ensuring young people have stable, enduring relationships and support networks they can rely on throughout their lives. Whether through family reunification, kinship care, mentorship or extended family, fostering these connections helps them feel secure, supported and empowered to navigate adulthood.

Public child welfare agencies, policymakers and community organizations must prioritize innovative strategies that strengthen relational permanency. Programs like Intercept, Kinship Navigator initiatives, Family Finding services and long-term mentorship models provide critical links for young people leaving foster care. Additionally, offering resources that encourage autonomy and decision-making while maintaining strong community and family ties promotes lifelong stability and belonging.

“ *Permanency isn't just adoption. It's knowing that even when I aged out of care, I had a family who supported me, even if we weren't related by blood.*”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Key Actions to Drive Permanency Work Forward

- **Prioritize Evidence-Based Intensive Home and Community-Based Behavioral Health Services** — To better support children, youth and families, we should work together to prioritize evidence-based, intensive in-home and community-based behavioral health models — such as Intercept — that have shown to reduce out-of-home placements and increase permanency. Improving the system requires stronger communication, clearer guidance and streamlined processes that enable states and providers to adopt innovative approaches more efficiently. By supporting youth-focused, in-home interventions, we can equip families with effective strategies earlier, helping prevent crises before they escalate and ensuring youth remain safely at home whenever possible.
- **Expand Kinship Navigator Programs** — Invest in and scale these programs that help young people connect with extended family members and fictive kin, offering them the chance to grow in familiar, supportive environments. Strengthen these programs with wraparound services, such as legal aid and financial support, to ensure families are well-equipped to provide long-term care.
- **Implement Family Finding and Engagement Initiatives** — Adopt family finding programs that use technology, relational mapping and caseworker engagement to help young people locate biological or extended family members. Create funding and training opportunities to ensure these programs can reconnect young people with relatives who can serve as lifelong resources and support.

■ **Promote Non-Legal Forms of Permanency** — Expand mentorship programs and peer support models where committed adults provide consistent, long-term support. Agencies should develop formal mentorship pathways for young people, focusing on relational permanency that can sustain them into adulthood, even if legal guardianship or adoption isn't the outcome.

■ **Ensure Youth Leadership in Permanency Planning** — Permanency plans should empower young adults to make decisions about the connections they value most. Encouraging autonomy in choosing mentors, kinship resources or community support ensures the process is youth-centered, respects their individual needs and strengthens their sense of control over their future.

■ **Federal and Policy-Level Support** — At the federal level, continued bipartisan support is essential for expanding programs like the Family First Prevention Services Act, which emphasizes keeping children safely with their families and out of foster care whenever possible by providing federal funding for evidence-based prevention services. These services include mental health treatment, substance use prevention and treatment and in-home parenting support for families at risk of entering the child welfare system.

Additionally, advocacy for increasing funding to states for kinship care and community-based programs will enhance efforts to connect young people with permanent support networks. Expanding eligibility for Title IV-E extended foster care beyond age 18, particularly in states without such services, will help ensure young adults transitioning out of foster care have the resources and time they need to secure permanency.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are resources and tools on permanency.

[FosterClub Permanency Pact](#)

[The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative](#)

[U.S. Children's Bureau — Promoting Permanency for Older Youth in Foster Care](#)

SECTION 4

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS — BUILDING A LIFELONG NETWORK

Community connections refer to the broader network of relationships developed by foster youth within their local environments — outside of their immediate caregivers or formal placements. This can include connections with peers, mentors, school staff, neighbors, employers and community organizations. For young adults leaving care, having a community to lean on means more than just support. It's about finding belonging, shared experiences and access to resources that foster personal and professional growth.

Feeling connected to a broader community can be a lifeline, an informal safety net, offering guidance and support when formal services are no longer available. Young people often face isolation after leaving care, with few people to rely on. Those with strong community ties are more likely to succeed in employment, education and maintaining stable housing.

Being connected to a community provides them with access to social networks, emotional support, job opportunities and a sense of identity within a group. The essence of community connections is belonging. For young people, being part of a group where they feel understood and supported helps them navigate the challenges of adulthood.

In building community connections, young adults need relationships based on mutual respect. When young people feel respected and valued by those around them, it

Connecting to the Core Principles



COMMUNITY



RESPECT



COLLABORATION

increases their self-confidence and helps them trust others. Respect allows them to feel empowered to contribute to their communities, knowing their voice matters.

Community connections thrive on collaboration. For young adults, collaboration within their communities means working together to identify and access resources, opportunities and support networks. Whether through a mentoring program, a local business or a peer group, community members working alongside young people create pathways for success and personal development.

“ When I aged out, I felt like I was on my own. Finding a group of people I could rely on outside of the system — friends, mentors — helped me feel like I belonged.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Implementation: Innovations in Strengthening Community Connections

This section explores strategies and programs that implement community-building, focusing on sustainable and scalable approaches. By leveraging partnerships, technology and lived experience, these initiatives empower young people to build networks that last beyond their time in care, creating a foundation for long-term stability and success. Together, these efforts demonstrate how fostering community connections can be integrated into child welfare systems as a cornerstone of support.

Community-Based Mentorship Programs

Local organizations, churches and community centers are increasingly offering mentorship programs that pair foster youth with trusted adults in the community. These mentors offer not only professional guidance but also emotional and social support, helping young adults integrate into their communities.

“ *The transition into adulthood is universally difficult and made even worse by the unique challenges and barriers for those with child welfare experience. Finding people to go to when you need emotional and psychological support is a vital part of building a platform from which you can grow and thrive. The right people come from all kinds of places — whether they be friends and peers, home-based attachments like kin, or even, in my case, my school counselor.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

EXAMPLE

Project LIFE, Virginia — Project Living Independently Focusing on Empowerment (LIFE) aims to enhance the successful transition of older youth in foster care to adulthood by: a) increasing the capacity of professionals working with young people to engage in sound, evidence-based practices, and b) promoting permanent connections, effective preparation for adulthood, and meaningful youth input into state and local policies and practices.

Project LIFE equips young people with the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to navigate adulthood successfully. The program seeks to ensure young people are actively involved in decisions affecting their lives. By promoting permanent connections and meaningful input into policies and practices, Project LIFE empowers foster youth to take control of their future, advocate for their needs and build a solid foundation for independence and success.

Public-Private Partnerships with Local Businesses

In some areas, public child welfare agencies have formed partnerships with local businesses to create job and apprenticeship programs for foster youth. These businesses not only provide employment but often create a community environment where young adults can build professional networks, gain mentors and find long-term support.

EXAMPLE

Community Connections Youth Project (CCYP) — Operated by FosterAdopt Connect, the Community Connections Youth Project (CCYP) is a strengths-based model of voluntary peer case management for youth aged 17-26 who are at risk of aging out of foster care or have already exited the system. This model

emphasizes each young person's inherent strengths and builds upon existing resources to produce better long-term outcomes. All staff connection specialists are alumni of the foster care system, providing a unique perspective to assist young people in transitioning to self-sufficiency.

This approach helps build a network of support that extends beyond traditional case management, providing a sense of belonging and stability for young people.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

Kids Voice Indiana — Kids Voice of Indiana is dedicated to advocating for and protecting children in the legal system through programs like Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and guardian ad litem (GAL). They focus on providing volunteer-based support to ensure children's rights are upheld in court, offering programs for safe, supervised parenting time and legal services. The organization promotes child welfare through education, advocacy and

mentorship, striving for a positive impact on vulnerable young people.

Healthy Family Thriving Collaboratives —

The document outlines various community-based collaboratives in Washington, D.C., that support at-risk families. These collaboratives offer a range of services including case management, parenting support, workforce development and housing assistance to reduce child maltreatment and promote family self-sufficiency. They target vulnerable populations, such as families at risk of child welfare involvement or those experiencing homelessness, with programs aimed at preventing family separation and fostering community resilience.

Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative (MYOI) —

MYOI is a collaborative effort between the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Oakland Livingston Human Services Agency, and numerous local community partners. MYOI's goal is "to ensure that young people in foster care have successful outcomes in housing, education, employment, community engagement and health."



“ *I wish I was more informed on the support groups my community had in place. The ability to connect with a peer with similar experiences would have been a tremendous mental and emotional support during my early college journey.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Call to Action

Community connections are vital for young people with child welfare experience. Beyond formal systems, they need strong, reliable community networks that provide emotional support, resources and a sense of belonging. These connections — whether through mentorship, peer networks or community-based programs — are critical to helping young people navigate the complexities of adulthood. They offer a buffer against isolation and provide emerging adults with social capital to thrive independently.

Public child welfare agencies, community organizations and policymakers must recognize the power of these relationships and invest in fostering them. Helping young people build and maintain meaningful connections within their communities strengthens their resilience, emotional well-being and future opportunities.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are resources and tools about mentorship.

[Boys and Girls Clubs of America](#)

[FosterClub Youth Network](#)

[The Foster Care Alumni of America \(FCAA\)](#)

[Foster Youth in Action](#)

[National Foster Youth Institute](#)

[Think of Us](#)

[Community Partnership for Youth \(CPY\)](#)

[Casey Family Programs – Building Community Connections for Foster Youth](#)

Key Actions to Drive Community Connections Forward

- **Expand Peer Support Networks** — Implement and grow peer support programs where young people with shared experiences can connect and support one another. National models provide structured peer mentoring and support for transition-age youth. Expanding these networks allows them to draw strength from their peers, share challenges and celebrate successes, reinforcing the importance of community-driven resilience.
- **Develop Community-Based Mentorship Programs** — Long-term mentorship can be a lifeline for young people offering stable, caring adult relationships outside of the formal child welfare system. These programs connect young people with community members who can provide guidance and emotional support. By formalizing these relationships, they gain trusted adults who can help them navigate educational, career and life challenges.
- **Promote Social Inclusion through Community Activities** — Encourage participation in community groups, clubs and local events. Leadership councils create spaces where young people can engage with their peers and community members in meaningful ways. These opportunities help build social skills, confidence and a sense of identity within the broader community.

“It was my job and my church community that really gave me the support I needed after foster care. They weren’t family, but they felt like one.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

■ **Strengthen Partnerships with Faith-Based and Civic Organizations** — Faith-based

groups and civic organizations have long been a source of support for marginalized populations. Encouraging partnerships between child welfare agencies and faith-based groups allows young people to access additional support systems. These groups can provide mentoring, community service opportunities and resources that foster a sense of belonging and purpose.

■ **Encourage Youth-Led Advocacy and Leadership** — Empowering young people

to become leaders in their communities builds confidence and a sense of agency. Local, state and national youth advisory groups and organizations provide platforms for foster youth to advocate for themselves and their peers, helping them develop leadership skills while creating stronger connections with their communities. These initiatives foster independence and give young people a voice in shaping the systems and policies that affect their lives.

■ **Federal and Policy-Level Support** —

Community connections should be integrated into federal policies addressing youth in foster care. Bipartisan support for community engagement initiatives is essential, such as those funded by the John Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. Expanding funding for programs that emphasize case management, peer support, mentorship and community involvement will help build networks of care around transition-age young people. Federal initiatives should encourage states to create cross-agency collaborations that ensure community-based support is accessible and robust for this population. Additionally, incentivizing partnerships with faith-based and civic groups can broaden the reach of these programs.



SECTION 5

HOUSING — SECURING STABILITY

Housing for young adults with lived experience in foster care is more than just providing a roof over their heads. It represents stability, safety and the foundation from which they can build their lives. For transition-age youth, accessing affordable, stable housing is a critical component of their journey to adulthood. Without secure housing, young people often struggle with education, employment and mental health, making it difficult to achieve lasting success after aging out of care.

Housing is a central issue for young adults. Many face housing instability or even homelessness once they leave the system, with limited financial resources and support networks to fall back on. Having a safe, stable home allows them to focus on other essential aspects of adulthood, such as finding a job, pursuing education and maintaining well-being. Lived experience leaders frequently emphasize that housing is the bedrock of their independence, providing them with a sense of security and a place they can call their own.

Connecting to the Core Principles



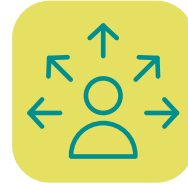
SAFETY



CHOICE



PERMANENCY



OPPORTUNITY

“ When I left care, finding housing was my biggest struggle. I didn’t have family to turn to, and the fear of not knowing where I’d end up weighed on me.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT



Young people need a stable, safe environment where they can rest, feel protected and establish routines. Housing insecurity or dangerous living conditions undermine their ability to build a stable future.

It's important young adults have choices about where and how they live. Providing options, whether through transitional housing, affordable apartments or other models, empowers them to find a living situation that fits their needs and lifestyle. Young people want the ability to make decisions about where they feel most comfortable.

Housing opportunities must be accessible to everyone aging out of care. Many former foster youth face discrimination, financial barriers or lack of resources that make finding affordable housing on their own difficult. It is essential that housing programs consider these barriers and provide tailored support to meet specific needs.

Implementation: Innovations in Housing Support

Transitional Housing Programs

Public child welfare agencies across the country are implementing transitional housing programs designed specifically for young people aging out of foster care. These programs offer short-term housing solutions, paired with case management and support services, to help them gain the skills and resources they need to live independently.

EXAMPLE

California, Illinois, Maryland, New York and Tennessee operate transitional living programs that utilize single-site, scattered-site or a combination of both models. These programs range from multiple youth living together in a single-family home to youth residing independently in apartments spread throughout a geographic area.

Foster Youth to Independence (FYI)

Initiative — The Foster Youth to Independence program provides tenant protection vouchers specifically for youth ages 18-24 who are leaving foster care without a permanent home. Administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in partnership with public housing authorities, FYI aims to prevent homelessness among former foster youth by offering stable housing and access to supportive services like education, employment training and counseling. This program addresses the urgent housing needs of transition-aged youth, helping them build a foundation for long-term success and independence.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

Arlington Apartments Y Social Impact

Center — YMCA of Greater Seattle is the largest provider of housing for homeless young adults in King County and the designated agency offering specialized case management for young adults transitioning out of the foster care system. The Y offers general case management services to all residents, 24/7 on-site services, and LifeSet is available to those interested in more intensive case management support.

“ Getting my first apartment after foster care was a turning point. It wasn't easy, but once I had stable housing, I could focus on everything else — work, school and my mental health.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

The Propelling Into Triumph (PIT) Center

is a Miami-based nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering young adults transitioning out of foster care. Propelling Into Triumph provides comprehensive services including success coaching that provides personalized support in academics, career readiness, life-skills and overall well-being. PIT also administers Saints House, a transitional housing initiative for young adults aging out of foster care (ages 18-23). Saints House not only provides shelter but also a comprehensive support system encompassing mentoring, coaching and access to vital wrap-around resources.

Apple Health and Homes — The Apple Health and Homes (AHAH) initiative in Washington state pairs healthcare services with housing resources to support vulnerable populations, including those with medical, behavioral and physical health conditions. AHAH offers capital funding for housing acquisition, rental assistance and supportive services. It is a multi-agency effort, led by the Department of Commerce, aimed at ensuring stable housing and improving health outcomes for eligible individuals.

Pivot Tiny Homes — Pivot's Tiny Homes initiative provides stable, affordable housing for transition-age youth facing homelessness. Located on Pivot's campus, these homes offer a supportive community with 24/7

staff and resources to help young people build life skills such as cooking, budgeting and problem-solving. The goal is not only to provide housing but also to foster self-reliance and long-term success through mentorship and access to essential services.

The Youth Success Project in New Hampshire is a youth-led organization committed to ending youth homelessness in the state by amplifying the voices and lived experiences of young people who experienced unaccompanied homelessness before the age of 25.

Housing Vouchers for Foster Youth

Many states are partnering with housing authorities to provide foster youth with housing vouchers that make renting more affordable.

EXAMPLE

Family Unification Program (FUP) —

The Family Unification Program provides housing assistance through HUD's Housing Choice Voucher program specifically for young people aging out of foster care and for families whose lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in their separation or risk of separation. By offering safe, stable housing, FUP helps those young people achieve greater independence and stability, as well as supports family reunification efforts to create long-term, supportive environments.

Public-Private Partnerships

In some areas, agencies are working with nonprofit organizations and developers to create affordable housing units reserved specifically for transition-age foster youth. These partnerships provide safe, affordable housing in areas where housing costs may otherwise be out of reach for young people without financial support.

“ *I use the FYI voucher, but I'm coming to the end of it. It was hard to access, and then once I found out about it, it was pretty much already too late.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

EXAMPLE

Genesis LA — Established as a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), Genesis LA offers flexible financing and real estate development support, leveraging New Markets Tax Credits to attract public and private capital. This funding supports community-driven projects and housing solutions, providing technical assistance and capital to help underserved communities build capacity and long-term stability. Genesis LA's approach balances calculated lending risks with a mission to extend critical financial resources, recognizing when grants or subsidies may be more effective in addressing systemic inequalities.

By offering both loans and grants to underserved communities, Genesis LA empowers local organizations and individuals to make decisions that best suit their needs. The flexibility in funding options allows for tailored solutions that reflect the unique circumstances of each project, offering communities the autonomy to choose the most effective path for sustainable development. This model fosters a sense of control and ownership, enabling communities to shape their own futures, prioritize their needs and create housing solutions that contribute to long-term stability.

Call to Action

Stable housing is a cornerstone of success for young people aging out of foster care or otherwise connected to the child welfare system. Without secure housing, youth are vulnerable to homelessness, instability and exploitation, making it difficult to pursue education, employment or build supportive relationships. Ensuring all young adults have access to safe, affordable and long-term housing options is essential for their well-being and self-sufficiency.

Public child welfare agencies, community-based organizations and policymakers must prioritize housing as a critical element of a young person's transition into adulthood. It's not just about providing a roof over their heads — it's about ensuring housing options come with the support, autonomy and safety needed for a smooth transition. States must collaborate with local housing authorities and invest in programs that provide flexible, trauma-informed housing solutions.

Key Actions to Drive Housing Initiatives Forward

- **Expand Transitional Housing Programs** — Increase the availability of transitional housing programs specifically tailored to youth exiting foster care. Programs like THP-Plus in California provide temporary, supportive housing with case management services that help young people work toward long-term housing stability while building life skills. Expanding these programs nationally will ensure more transition-age youth have access to safe living environments.
- **Strengthen Supportive Housing Models** — Supportive housing models, which combine affordable housing with services like mental health support, substance abuse treatment and employment assistance, are crucial for young adults facing complex challenges. Programs like Denver's Bridging the Gap help people to gain stability while addressing individual barriers.
- **Provide Flexible Housing Vouchers** — Implement and expand flexible housing vouchers for transition-age youth, similar to the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers offered through HUD. These vouchers should allow young adults to choose housing options that

fit their unique needs, whether that is an apartment close to their school or housing that allows them to remain connected to a support network.

- **Create Community-Based Housing Collaborations** — Encourage partnerships between child welfare agencies, housing authorities and local community organizations to develop housing projects specifically for foster youth. Programs like Houston's The Way Home coordinate cross-agency efforts to reduce youth homelessness and offer affordable housing solutions. These collaborative efforts should be expanded to provide regionally accessible housing options.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are resources and tools related to housing.

[National Alliance to End Homelessness — Housing Models for Transition-Aged Youth](#)

[U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\) — Foster Youth to Independence \(FYI\) Program](#)

- **Develop Peer and Mentor Support in Housing Settings** — Young people leaving foster care often face isolation. Providing peer navigators or mentors who can help them navigate their housing options and offer guidance on independent living skills can be transformative. Programs like First Place for Youth in California blend housing with mentorship, helping them gain both independence and community support.
- **Federal and Policy-Level Support** — Housing for transition-age youth should be a federal priority. Continued bipartisan support for programs like HUD's Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative is essential. Increasing funding for housing vouchers, expanding eligibility beyond the limited age ranges and improving access to supportive housing programs are necessary steps to prevent youth homelessness. Federal initiatives should also promote the integration of trauma-informed care and wraparound services in housing programs, ensuring that transition-age youth receive the holistic support they need as they establish stability.

“If we were to advocate more for families who live in poverty [who] just need an extra push and resources, less youth and children would enter the foster care system.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT



SECTION 6

GOING BEYOND BASIC NEEDS — BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR STABILITY

Young people involved in the child welfare system often face unique and complex challenges in meeting basic needs that others may take for granted, including safe housing, reliable access to food, healthcare and transportation. For emerging adults, addressing these fundamental needs is not just about ensuring immediate safety and well-being; it's about building a secure foundation that enables them to pursue stability, personal growth and independence.

When their basic needs are unmet, young adults can become overwhelmed with survival concerns, limiting their ability to engage in education, employment and community life. However, when their essential needs are consistently provided for, they are empowered to envision a future where they can thrive, make empowered choices and confidently navigate life's opportunities and challenges.

Knowing they have secure access to food, shelter and health services contributes to a sense of safety and reduces the risk of homelessness or exploitation, which young people are especially vulnerable to as they leave foster care. Support from local agencies, community organizations and programs reinforce the idea that young people are not alone. Community partnerships amplify resources and create a reliable support network.

Connecting to the Core Principles



SAFETY



SECURITY



EMPOWERMENT



COMMUNITY

This section offers guidance and innovative approaches for supporting basic needs, helping young people achieve self-sufficiency as they transition into adulthood. By exploring current programs, policy examples and resources, child welfare agencies and community partners can create pathways that ensure every young person exiting foster care has access to the essential resources they need. The following pages provide a roadmap for stabilizing basic needs as a catalyst for youth success, detailing promising practices, practical tools and actionable insights for young adults and those who support them.

“Knowing I had access to food and a safe place to stay meant I could start focusing on things that mattered to me, like finding a job and building my future.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Implementation: Innovations in Basic Needs and Beyond Support

Many agencies and organizations are implementing innovative approaches to help meet the basic needs of transition-age youth. These efforts ensure young people have access to resources and are empowered to manage their needs independently.

Referral and Case Management Support

Referral and case management support programs play a crucial role in assisting youth as they leave foster care. These programs create a safety net that empowers young people to overcome barriers and achieve stability.

EXAMPLE

Foster Love's Rapid Response Program — This safety net program provides emergency funding to college students with foster care experience, helping them overcome barriers that threaten their ability to stay in school. Partnering with higher education institutions and government service providers, Rapid Response offers quick access to resources covering essential needs like technology for online learning, educational expenses,

groceries, utilities and other critical support, ensuring students can continue their education uninterrupted. By addressing these immediate barriers, the program helps create a stable environment for students to thrive academically, promoting long-term stability in their educational and personal lives.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

Foster Success — Provides one-on-one referrals to community resources, including housing, food, financial support and more. They also help foster youth track down important documents and offer mental health support.

Youth Services Network — The Youth Services Network (YSN) connects young people with essential services, including shelter, food, healthcare, mental health support and educational resources. The network helps vulnerable young adults access drop-in centers, employment opportunities, and resources for pregnant or parenting youth. YSN also provides outreach workers to ensure those in need can find the assistance required for their well-being and stability.

Firefly Children & Family Alliance — Firefly Children & Family Alliance offers a range of services to support children, families and adults in Indiana, focusing on child abuse prevention, family preservation and recovery services. Programs include family resource centers, foster care, adoption support, mental health counseling and substance use treatment. They also provide home-based services to help families stay together and assist older youth leaving foster care.

The goal is to ensure long-term stability and wellness for vulnerable individuals and families.

412 Youth Zone — The 412 Youth Zone offers various resources to help emerging adults achieve independence and success. Services

“ *My education has a huge impact on my future career as a social worker, and in my life. I want to show people that no matter what goes on in your life, it is never too late to be successful and pursue an education.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

include housing assistance, education support (e.g., GED prep), job readiness programs, life skills workshops, healthcare access and stipends. Young people are paired with coaches to create personalized plans, and the drop-in center provides essential services like meals, laundry and social space. Additionally, the Youth Zone offers specialized resources for young parents and those leaving foster care.

Food Security Initiatives

Food security initiatives are crucial for transition-age youth as they provide essential access to nutritious food, which supports physical and mental health during a critical period of growth and development. Additionally, these initiatives help ensure stability and resilience, enabling young people to focus on education, employment and personal development without the stress of food insecurity.

EXAMPLE

Massachusetts Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) –

Provides eligible young people with food and cash assistance as they transition out of foster care, ensuring access to groceries and essential items.

This support helps stabilize their basic needs during a vulnerable period, providing them with the security necessary to focus on other aspects of adulthood, such as housing, employment and education.



“ [I was] in a homeless shelter through foster care. . . [and then] I went to a youth transitional center. It was hard for me to stay there, too, because I was about to age out. I was finishing high school around the same time I turned 18, so I couldn't stay in a group home, but I also couldn't stay at that center. I did end up homeless for a little while after that.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Transportation Assistance

Transportation is essential for transition-age youth as it provides the mobility needed to access education, employment and essential services. Reliable transportation enables these young adults to pursue job opportunities, attend school and maintain important appointments, fostering independence and self-sufficiency. Without adequate transportation, they may face significant barriers that hinder their ability to build a stable and successful life after care.

EXAMPLE

Florida Keys to Independence Program —

This program provides financial assistance for driver's education, car insurance and other transportation needs, empowering young adults to gain independence and access employment opportunities. This enables them to take control of their own future, promoting confidence and self-sufficiency as they move into adulthood.

“ By the grace of God, I was introduced to Keys to Independence. At first, I was like, ‘this doesn’t seem real,’ so I didn’t really pay attention. But I went on the website, and I was looking at it, and I was like, ‘Wow, this is actually real.’ So, I did my six hours, and they also paid for me to have driving lessons — and driving lessons are expensive — so I was able to get those for free. I think I got three sessions, and then got my insurance paid for six months... It was really just a blessing.”

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ADDITIONAL EXAMPLE(S):

Texas Transitioning Youth Transportation Program —

Collaborates with local transportation services to offer low-cost transit passes for youth in foster care, removing barriers to employment, education and healthcare.

Just In Time — Helps young people receive their driver's licenses.

Life Skills Programs

Life skills programs play a crucial role in preparing those who experienced foster care or other involvement with the child welfare system. These programs provide young people with the practical knowledge and tools necessary to navigate the complexities of daily life — like doing laundry, cooking balanced meals or car maintenance. By equipping young adults with these essential life skills, programs like these promote self-sufficiency, independence and confidence, setting the foundation for successful adulthood. For young people who didn't have the opportunity to develop these skills with caregivers, these programs are an invaluable resource for fostering resilience, stability and long-term success.

EXAMPLE

Casey Life Skills (CLS) is a set of free tools that assess the independent skills young people need to achieve their long-term goals. It aims to guide youth toward developing healthy, productive lives. Some of the functional areas that CLS assesses include daily living and self-care activities; maintaining healthy relationships; work and study habits; using community resources; money management; computer literacy and online safety; civic engagement; and navigating the child welfare system.

The program emphasizes the importance of holistic development, empowering young

people to understand their needs, build coping strategies and maintain balance in their lives, ultimately contributing to their overall well-being and long-term success.

Call to Action

Ensuring the basic needs of transition-age youth are met requires dedicated collaboration among child welfare agencies, community organizations and policymakers. Public child welfare agencies must establish partnerships with housing providers, food programs, healthcare systems and transportation services to create a comprehensive safety net. By prioritizing these partnerships, agencies can prevent transition-age youth from experiencing crises and empower them to achieve self-sufficiency.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are resources and tools.

[National Center for Housing and Child Welfare \(NCHCW\)](#)

[SNAP Exceptions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness and Exiting Foster Care](#)

Key Actions to Drive Basic Needs Forward

■ Establish Interagency Partnerships

— Create partnerships between child welfare agencies, housing authorities and healthcare providers to ensure youth have streamlined access to basic resources.

■ Advocate for Medicaid Extension —

Promote policies that extend Medicaid coverage to transition-age youth up to age 26 across all states, ensuring continuity of healthcare access.

■ Support Employment and Housing Coordination —

Encourage federal support and incentives for programs that integrate housing stability with employment training, recognizing the interconnectedness of these basic needs.

■ Enhance Financial Literacy Programs

— Implement financial literacy and budgeting programs within foster care services to empower young adults to manage resources independently and prepare for adulthood.

By committing to these actions, agencies, advocates and policymakers can lay the groundwork for those transitioning from or otherwise connected to the child welfare system to build their futures on a foundation of stability, support and self-sufficiency.

“ Had I known I could have had help learning basic life skills or getting basic hygiene items and clothes, I would not have gone through the stress of figuring it out on my own.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT



SECTION 7

HEALTH — SUPPORTING WELL-BEING

Access to healthcare and comprehensive support for mental and physical health is a critical component of the journey toward independence and long-term well-being. Many young people involved with child welfare systems have experienced trauma and instability, which can have lasting effects on their mental, emotional and physical health. As they transition into adulthood, they face the added challenge of navigating healthcare systems independently, often with limited knowledge of available resources, few established healthcare relationships and barriers limiting access to care that can leave essential health needs unmet.

Healthcare is more than just physical well-being; it encompasses mental health, emotional stability and preventive care that enables young people to thrive as they enter

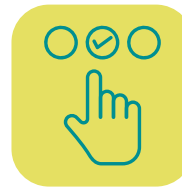
“Continuous access to mental healthcare was a game-changer for me. Growing up in care, I carried trauma and anxiety that often felt overwhelming. Having a consistent therapist who understood my experiences gave me a safe space to process my emotions and start to heal. Without that ongoing support, I wouldn’t have had the tools to build the confidence and stability I needed to move forward.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Connecting to the Core Principles



TRUST



CHOICE



WELL-BEING



SAFETY

adulthood. Addressing health needs early, providing continuity of care and facilitating access to supportive services are all critical for ensuring transition-age youth do not face further setbacks or health-related obstacles. Equipping them with knowledge about health systems, self-advocacy skills and a network of supportive care providers helps lay the foundation for long-term well-being.

Building trust with healthcare providers and systems is essential for transition-age youth to feel comfortable seeking health services. When young adults can rely on consistent, honest and dependable interactions with healthcare professionals, they are more likely to access and engage with preventive and ongoing health services.

Allowing young adults to make informed decisions about their healthcare fosters a sense of control and autonomy, especially important for those who often feel their decisions are made for them. Choice in healthcare settings empowers young people to take charge of their health, making decisions about treatments, providers and wellness practices that align with their personal goals and values.



“ When I exited care, I was terrified of navigating life on my own, especially without the safety net of the system. What made all the difference were the healthcare providers who treated me with empathy and didn’t make me feel like just another case. They connected me to mental health resources that helped me deal with my past while equipping me to build a future. That support gave me hope and reminded me I’m not alone in this journey.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Providing physical and emotional safety in healthcare settings allows young people to feel secure in their care environments. Trauma-informed, non-judgmental healthcare interactions are crucial for young adults to heal from past trauma and feel comfortable discussing sensitive health issues, which is foundational to successful healthcare engagement and outcomes.

Ensuring comprehensive well-being means supporting young people with resources for physical, mental and emotional health, as well as providing access to preventive care and financial assistance for healthcare needs. Focusing on overall well-being helps them not only survive but thrive and sets them up for a healthier adulthood.

This section explores innovative approaches and resources to ensure transition-age youth have access to healthcare services that meet their unique needs, from preventive care to mental health support. By examining current programs, key policies and practical resources, public child welfare agencies and community partners can create and sustain healthcare initiatives that prioritize the whole-person health of young adults as they exit the foster care system. The following sections provide a framework for how to support young people with tailored health programs, foster well-being and create accessible pathways to lifelong health independence.

Implementation: Innovations in Health Support

This section highlights real-world strategies and programs designed to improve health outcomes for young people involved with child welfare systems. Recognizing the unique health challenges they face — such as access to consistent healthcare, mental health services and trauma-informed support — this section offers practical examples from agencies across the country. These initiatives aim to bridge gaps in healthcare access, provide holistic support and establish continuity of care that follows young adults beyond their time in the foster care system. By spotlighting these innovative programs, the implementation section serves as a toolkit for agencies looking to enhance their support for physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Health Access Programs

Health access programs are essential for ensuring young people transitioning from or involved with child welfare systems receive the care and support they need to thrive. These programs provide critical services that address immediate health needs and long-term wellness, empowering young people to take control of their physical, mental and emotional health. Given the trauma and

“ I attribute my life and success to an important provision granting Medicaid to former foster youth until they reach age 26... Without this valuable healthcare benefit, I would have incurred insurmountable debt or avoided going to the hospital for life-saving care when I needed it.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

instability many young people experience while in foster care, consistent access to comprehensive health services is crucial for healing and growth. Health access programs not only facilitate medical care but also offer resources for mental health, substance use and preventive care, helping build a foundation for success for emerging adults.

Medicaid eligibility for Former Foster Care Children (FFCC), also known as former foster youth, is designed to ensure continued access to essential health coverage during the critical years after they age out of the foster care system, regardless of their income. This provision aligns with the Affordable Care Act (ACA) requirement that allows young adults to remain on their parents' private health insurance until age 26.

EXAMPLE

Former Foster Care Medicaid — In 2023, at least 112,000 individuals were enrolled in the Former Foster Care Children (FFCC) Medicaid eligibility group for at least one month across 46 states and the District of Columbia. Participants were between ages 18 through 25.

The Medicaid Extension to Age 26 extends healthcare coverage to former foster youth up to the age of 26, ensuring they have continuous access to the medical and mental health services they need. This support is critical in alleviating concerns about healthcare access as they become adults. Having stable access to healthcare provides a sense of physical and emotional safety, enabling young adults to focus on their personal growth and independence without the added stress of navigating healthcare coverage alone.

“ Without insurance and with the current cost of education, housing and food, we risk homelessness when we have large medical bills. Medicaid is a tangible way to support foster youth as they work toward self-sufficiency.”

**CODY RIVERA, NEW YORK
LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT**

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLE

Michigan's Foster Care Transition Clinic

— This clinic provides free, specialized healthcare to former foster youth, ensuring access to both mental and physical health services, which are essential for stability.

Promoting Consistency in Healthcare Relationships

Promoting consistency in healthcare relationships is essential for transition-age youth. Continuity in healthcare providers and services helps build trust and familiarity, enabling young adults to feel more comfortable and supported in managing their health. For those who experienced instability and trauma, having a consistent healthcare provider fosters a sense of stability and security, allowing them to address physical and mental health needs more effectively. A steady relationship with healthcare professionals also encourages young people to seek necessary care, adhere to treatment plans and engage in preventive health practices, ultimately contributing to better long-term health outcomes.

EXAMPLE

California's Health4All Initiative —

Extends Medi-Cal (Medicaid) coverage to transition-age youth up to age 26, ensuring consistent access to healthcare providers and resources. By extending

Medi-Cal coverage, the program fosters a sense of reliability and security, which is essential for those who experienced instability in foster care. Continuity in healthcare coverage and access to a consistent network of providers helps these young adults build trust in the healthcare system, encouraging them to seek medical care when needed, follow treatment plans and prioritize their well-being.

Mental Health Support

Mental health support is critical for transition-age youth, as this support helps address the emotional and psychological challenges that often arise from experiences of trauma, instability and loss. These young people may have faced significant adversity — including abuse, neglect or frequent placement changes — which can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression and difficulties in building trust. Access to mental health services not only promotes emotional healing but also equips young people with the coping skills, resilience and self-awareness necessary for a successful transition into adulthood. Ensuring mental health support is readily available is essential for helping them achieve stability, build relationships and lead fulfilling, independent lives.

EXAMPLE

Michigan's Trauma-Informed Care Programs —

Provides mental health support and counseling specifically tailored to address trauma and resilience-building in

“ A trauma-informed therapist would have helped me process what I went through and aided my dad's understanding of my behavior and how to properly support me.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

foster youth, helping them cope with past experiences as emerging adults. These programs create a secure environment where foster youth can safely process past experiences and develop the emotional skills needed for a stable and successful adulthood. Young adults can build trust in themselves and others, while developing the resilience necessary to navigate the challenges of life beyond foster care.

Supporting Preventive Health and Self-Care

Supporting preventive health and self-care is crucial for young people moving from the foster care system, as it empowers them to take control of their physical and mental well-being. Preventive health practices help prevent the onset of chronic conditions, reduce healthcare costs and improve overall quality of life. By promoting self-care, young people are equipped with the tools and knowledge to make informed choices about their health, build healthy habits and develop the skills to manage stress and emotions effectively. These proactive steps not only contribute to better health outcomes but also foster a sense of agency, enabling them to thrive as emerging adults.

EXAMPLE

Massachusetts Health Empowerment Program— Focuses on health education for foster youth, providing self-care training,

“ *Had it not been for some former foster youth campaigning and doing outreach, I would not have found out that I could get insurance, and I honestly don't know if I would have still been here today.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT



preventive health resources and connecting transition-age youth to community health mentors who help them navigate healthcare services and understand wellness practices. This program equips young people with the knowledge and tools to take control of their own health. It fosters confidence and independence, empowering young adults to make informed decisions about their well-being and navigate healthcare systems effectively. This approach builds their capacity to advocate for their health needs, setting them on a path to long-term wellness and self-sufficiency.

Resources for Crisis Intervention and Immediate Care

Resources for crisis intervention and immediate care are critical for young people transitioning out of foster care, as they often face sudden challenges that require urgent attention. These resources provide timely support in moments of emotional, physical or situational distress, helping them navigate immediate risks, stabilize their circumstances and prevent further trauma.

Effective crisis intervention ensures they have access to the care and assistance they need when they are most vulnerable, laying a foundation for long-term recovery, stability and empowerment. By offering immediate care, these programs play a crucial role in maintaining the safety and well-being of young people as they build their futures.

EXAMPLE

New York City's Mental Health Mobile Crisis Teams

— Designed to provide rapid support and intervention for young people experiencing mental health crises, helping to prevent escalation and promote safety. This initiative provides immediate, on-the-ground support to young people experiencing mental health crises, ensuring they receive the care and resources necessary to stabilize and begin the recovery process. By addressing mental health needs in real-time, the program promotes emotional and psychological well-being, helping young people navigate intense stress and trauma. This access to crisis intervention enhances their overall health, supporting them in their journey toward resilience and long-term stability.

Call to Action

Meeting the health needs of young people is an investment in their future and in the well-being of communities. Agencies, community-based organizations and policymakers must work together to remove barriers to healthcare access, provide mental health resources and build support systems around the unique health needs of transition-age youth. This involves expanding access to Medicaid and community health programs, prioritizing trauma-informed care and ensuring young people have the tools and knowledge to advocate for their own health.

Creating a health safety net that meets young people where they are and provides for their evolving needs is essential to building pathways to a healthier, stable future. Now is the time to champion policies and programs that bring whole-person health to every transition-age youth.



“ It [interaction with law enforcement] was mental-health related. I was handcuffed several times and there was no mental health assessment team there to help. They would say I was not under arrest, but I was manic and really scared. The handcuffs were tight.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Key Actions to Move Healthcare Initiatives Forward

- **Enhance Access to Trauma-Informed Mental Health Services** — Increase funding for trauma-informed mental health programs specifically designed for foster youth, including access to specialized counselors and peer support services.
- **Health Navigators for Transition-Age Youth** — Establish health navigator or case management roles within public child welfare agencies to help young people in or leaving foster/kinship care understand their health benefits, make informed choices and connect with local healthcare providers.
- **Require Comprehensive Health Assessments When Planning for Exiting Foster Care** — Include a full health assessment in each young person's plan for leaving foster care, addressing both physical and mental health needs. Ensure those in or leaving foster/kinship care have documented health plans and follow-up care set up prior to exiting care.
- **Prioritize Mental Health as Part of Whole-Person Care** — Adopt policies mandating mental health screenings and ongoing support, including access to preventive mental health services, support groups and crisis intervention.
- **Implement Health Education and Self-Advocacy Training** — Integrate health literacy and self-advocacy education into the foster care system so young people can learn to navigate healthcare systems, advocate for their own health needs and practice preventive care.
- **Strengthen Access to Preventive and Primary Care Services** — Develop partnerships with community clinics and health centers to offer primary and preventive care to young people in or leaving foster/kinship care at low or no cost, ensuring accessible health resources.

- **Develop Flexible Crisis Intervention and Emergency Health Funds** — Establish emergency funds specifically for young people in or leaving foster/kinship care to cover urgent health needs, such as mental health crises, emergency room visits and prescription medication, that might otherwise lead to financial strain or unaddressed health issues.
- **Create Incentives for Healthcare Providers to Serve Foster Youth** — Introduce tax benefits or other incentives for healthcare providers who specialize in working with foster youth or who accept Medicaid to expand the network of youth-friendly providers available to transition-age young people.
- **Strengthen Data Collection on Health Outcomes** — Enhance national data collection and reporting on health outcomes for young people leaving foster or kinship care. Use this data to shape policies, improve access and drive funding to areas where health disparities are most significant.

Implementing these policy actions can create a more robust healthcare safety net, ensuring young people have access to comprehensive, consistent and supportive health resources as they move toward adulthood.



Want to Dive Deeper?

Here are more resources and tools related to healthcare.

[Youth Health Hub](#)

[Center for Healthcare Strategies \(CHCS\)](#)

[U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(HHS\) – Promoting Health for Youth in Foster Care](#)

SECTION 8

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE — COMPREHENSIVE AND SPECIALIZED SUPPORT

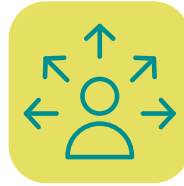
Evidence shows that high-quality, federally reimbursable extended foster care (EFC) improves long-term outcomes for young people who experienced foster care. However, EFC is underutilized, and the services and support that are available often do not meet the needs of young people. Experts, including individuals with lived experience, have repeatedly named expanding and improving EFC as critical to improving outcomes for young people transitioning to adulthood.

Although services for former foster youth have improved, outcomes are still lagging:

- 31% of young people experience homelessness at least once between 17 and 21
- 86% complete high school or get a GED by age 21
- 51% have been arrested before age 24, compared to 14% of non-fostered peers

EFC incentivizes states to allow young adults to remain in care until they turn 21 years old by providing funding for services. Those services include helping young adults make the transition to self-sufficiency; helping them receive education, training and services necessary to obtain employment; providing personal and emotional support through mentors and promoting interactions with dedicated adults; providing financial, housing, counseling, employment, education and other appropriate support and services.

Connecting to the Core Principles



OPPORTUNITY



RELATIONSHIPS



WELL-BEING



SAFETY



Advocates believe services should continue past 21 to give young people who experience foster care similar support as their peers receive from their families.

Each additional year in EFC after age 18:

- Increases the probability of completing a high school credential by about 8%
- Increases the expected probability of enrolling in college by 5% to 12%
- Increases the time employed between ages 21 and 23 by about 1.5 months
- Increases total earnings between ages 21 and 23 by about \$2,300–\$3,200
- Increases the amount of money in their bank accounts by about \$650
- Increases the odds of feeling they have enough people to turn to for emotional support, tangible support and advice/guidance
- Decreases the odds of being food insecure in the past 12 months by about 21%
- Decreases the odds of a recent arrest by about 28%
- Decreases the odds of being homeless or couch-surfing between ages 21 and 23 by about 19%

“When we are in foster care, all our major basic needs are met automatically... The problem is we are not prepared to complete these tasks for ourselves.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

Four federal laws provide funding: John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, 2008; Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021.

Since the passage of the Fostering Connections Act in 2008, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), as of June 2024, approved 34 states and nine federally recognized tribes to use Title IV-E funding to extend foster care services to youth ages 18 to 21. States have flexibility in how they implement their EFC programs, including age limit, placement and re-entry into extended care, and payments directly to youth. Under Title IV-E, eligible youth must meet at least one of five education or employment-related criteria. States may choose to adopt all or only some of these criteria to determine eligibility for their programs. Additionally, states may provide EFC in supervised independent living settings, an option generally not available for youth under 18 receiving federal reimbursement.

Two states, Illinois and Tennessee, re-evaluate eligibility for youth when they turn 18. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) permits states to close and later re-open EFC cases to conduct new eligibility determinations for youth between the ages of 18 and 21.

EXAMPLES

Tennessee and Idaho became the first states to extend foster care to age 23 this year; [Texas offers EFC](#) for young adults beyond the age of 18, recognizing many transition-age youth need continued support to successfully move into adulthood.

EFC programs provide a secure and supportive environment as young people move into adulthood. These programs

offer continued access to stable housing, healthcare and case management, reducing the risks associated with homelessness, unemployment or lack of resources. By extending the protective framework of foster care, young adults have the physical and emotional security needed to focus on personal growth, education and career development. Feeling safe allows them to take measured steps toward independence while knowing they have a reliable safety net to fall back on, fostering confidence and resilience.

Comprehensive Support

EXAMPLE

Youth Villages LifeSet® Program Model —

Youth Villages developed LifeSet, a program model designed to help young people aging out of the foster care system or facing similar challenges. The model is provided through direct services and partnerships with jurisdictions and private providers. It offers individualized, comprehensive support to help young people develop essential life skills, secure stable housing, pursue education or employment, and establish healthy relationships. LifeSet helps young people identify and achieve their own goals, while addressing both practical and emotional needs.

LifeSet is the largest program in the country helping young people who turn 18 in foster care and one of the only programs to have proven impacts in a [large clinical trial](#) conducted by national research group, MDRC. Rigorous evaluations of the program are also underway in Illinois and New Jersey.



“Extended foster care is such an incredibly important option to support the successful transitions to adulthood of young people exiting the foster care system in Texas. In a legal sense, the courts have said that we as a system are the ‘parents’ of these young people, and I know I wasn’t ready to be fully independent and self-sufficient at 18 myself. In Texas, not only do we provide extended foster care for young adults up to 21 (or in some cases 22), we [also] have been working hard to increase participation rates and length of stay as we help these young people build the foundations for successful futures and are beginning to see the positive impact of these supports.”

TODD SERPICO

DIVISION ADMINISTRATOR OF TRANSITIONAL LIVING SERVICES, TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

Indiana Older Youth Services — The Indiana Older Youth Initiatives support foster youth aged 16-23 moving to adulthood. Services include education, training, housing, employment assistance and emotional support. Programs like Older Youth Services (OYS), Collaborative Care and Voluntary Services help young people build self-sufficiency and access community resources. EFC is available up to age 21, and voluntary services provide a safety net until age 23. The initiatives emphasize positive personal growth and preparation for life after foster care.

Specialized Support Roles — Texas hired housing and employment specialists to specifically address the unique needs of transition-age youth, improving their chances of long-term stability.

Arizona's IV-E Extended Foster Care Program — In 2023, Arizona created an [Extended Foster Care Success Coaching program](#), which replaced the traditional case management model, and transformed the

state's IV-E program to provide intensive and consistent support to young adults as they transition to adulthood.

Independence Program with Tennessee's Bright Future Program — In 2025, Tennessee expanded extended foster care to 23 in the Bright Future program. Young adults are supported by case managers who specialize in working with this age group. Tennessee has removed all EFC participation requirements, allowing eligible young people to re-enter care at any time.

Primary Caring Adult (PCA) — This New Hampshire-based program emphasizes creating personalized plans for young people aging out of care, focusing on education, employment, housing, health and connections. The form ensures collaboration between youth, caseworkers and support networks, promoting independence and stability.

“ FosterClub has been amazing at answering my questions and being there for me when I need someone to talk to. All I have to do is send FosterClub an email and I usually get a response really fast. I am a teen in foster care with my child, so FosterClub has really helped me a lot with answering my questions and getting me the resources I need.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT



Peer Support

Peer support is vital for young people because it offers relatable guidance, encouragement and connection. This support, provided by individuals who have shared similar experiences, fosters a sense of belonging and reduces the feelings of isolation often experienced by young people in care. Peer mentors serve as trusted allies who understand the unique challenges of navigating the system and early adulthood.

They provide practical advice, emotional support and inspiration, empowering young adults to build confidence and develop essential life skills. By offering an authentic perspective and fostering a supportive community, peer support creates pathways for young people to achieve personal and professional success while emphasizing the importance of relationships built on trust and understanding. These programs respect the different experiences young people have and help them build lasting relationships with others from similar backgrounds.

EXAMPLE

EPIC 'OHANA — This Hawaii organization offers youth partners for young adults between 18-27 years old with lived experience in systems (foster care, mental health, juvenile justice, etc.) They act as young-adult-to-youth peer supporters for youth ages 12 and older in the state.

Early Intervention and Supportive Networks

Intervention during high school is critical in helping young adults explore their post-secondary education and career options. Additionally, ongoing support networks can ensure they remain connected to resources as they transition into adulthood.

EXAMPLE

Fostering Success — This Michigan, campus-based network funded through programs like the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, connects foster youth with coaches who provide career guidance, emotional support and access to job opportunities.

By creating a community of mentors, coaches and peers, Fostering Success ensures foster youth have a reliable and supportive network they can turn to for guidance, encouragement and resources as they move to adulthood. This sense of community offers a foundation of stability and belonging, essential young adults navigate the complexities of life after care.



“ [Fostering Success] has a database where you can search all universities and colleges available that already have existing campus staff who are trained and equipped to help a foster youth entering that institution.”

LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

Red Bank High School, New Jersey —

Early intervention by high school counseling staff ensures foster youth are guided through post-secondary education planning, helping them identify career paths and access the resources necessary to succeed after graduation.

Casa Valentina is focused on providing support and resources for LGBTQ+ youth in the foster care system. It offers programs and services designed to create safe and affirming environments for these young people, including advocacy, mentorship and community engagement. The site emphasizes the importance of acceptance and understanding, aiming to empower them to thrive and find their voices.

Teen Works — This Indiana-based program empowers underserved teens with skills, experiences and support for success in community, college and careers. Starting with a six-week summer job program, it offers comprehensive support through high school, post-secondary education and beyond. Over a decade, TeenWorks has impacted more than 4,500 teens by focusing on long-term sustainable futures through mentorship, life skills and career preparation.

Call to Action

Every year, thousands of young people age out of foster care, often without the safety net of family, stable housing, or access to education and employment opportunities. These young people deserve to thrive in a future they create. Extending foster care services to 21 and beyond, plus comprehensive and specialized services can put them on a path to success as adults.

Key Actions to Drive Extension of Foster Care and Comprehensive, Specialized Support

- **Extend Support to Age 21 and Beyond** — Advocate for EFC services beyond age 18, including housing, employment and education support. This extension is key for young adults who still need time to solidify permanent connections and build independent living skills. States like Arizona, Tennessee, New York and Texas have demonstrated the effectiveness of this type of extended support, with Tennessee extending support to age 23.
- **Provide Comprehensive and Specialized Support Services** — Youth aging out of care often have an array of needs around trauma, mental health and systemic barriers. Comprehensive support means a young person can receive support from all those needs, and specialized programs can meet an individual's particular needs, like money management, life skills or legal aid.
- **Establish Structured Peer Support Networks** — Create peer-led groups and programs where former foster youth can connect, share resources and support each other through transitions.
- **Invest in Long-Term Mentorship Programs** — Consistent, caring adult relationships are critical for emotional and professional development. Programs can pair youth with mentors for the long-term – focusing on peer mentoring with young adults who have experienced foster care themselves.

CONCLUSION

A NATIONAL CALL TO ACTION

Leaving foster/kinship care is often fraught with obstacles that compound over time, such as a lack of affordable housing, inconsistent access to healthcare, limited educational opportunities and insufficient economic resources. These barriers are exacerbated by systemic issues, such as fragmented services, over-reliance on temporary placements and limited support for young people post-age 18. These issues create gaps that often lead to negative outcomes like housing instability, unfulfilled educational goals and unemployment.

However, young adults who experience foster care as children are resilient, with vast potential, poised to thrive when given access to resources, opportunities and the support systems they deserve. This playbook is a call to action to address barriers, harness existing strengths within child welfare systems, and advocate for transformative policy shifts that elevate youth voice, leverage promising practices and center opportunity.

There are nearly 100 policy recommendations in the eight sections of the playbook to specifically improve outcomes for young adults around education, employment, permanency, community connections, housing, basic needs, health and comprehensive support.



We conclude with eight overarching policy recommendations for state and federal action:

1. Co-Design Systems Centered on Shared Power

— The future of child welfare, as envisioned by leaders with lived experience, is systems where young people not only receive services but also help shape them — contributing ideas, guiding decisions and creating solutions that reflect their unique journeys. Co-design must be central to every program, policy and funding decision, ensuring those with lived experience have a meaningful role in shaping the resources and services designed to support them.

Young adults with lived experience should be embedded in decision-making at every level. Federal and state program guidelines should require the inclusion of individuals with lived experience in the program design, implementation and evaluation processes. There should be expanded funding to build out compensation and outreach for the inclusion of young people with lived experience and the creation of power sharing.

Programs co-created with youth are more effective and sustainable, aligning closely with real-world challenges. In addition, continuous feedback loops should be created to capture ongoing input from transition-age youth, using this feedback to inform policy updates and innovations. Feedback ensures programs remain adaptive and responsive to evolving needs.

2. Prioritize prevention services for older youth

— The Family First Prevention Services Act focuses on family-based care, but its emphasis on stability and permanency offers a framework to support older youth. Family First should be expanded to allow funding to support

young adults aging out of foster care. Expanding its application to meet the specific needs of older youth and young adults can help states ensure stable resources for this population.

3. Increase funding through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood

— The Chafee program addresses critical housing, education and employment needs. Over time, Chafee allocations have not kept up with rising costs or the needs of young people. Enhancing its funding and flexibility can better empower young adults to meet real-world challenges. A doubling of Chafee allocations would address rising housing, educational and employment costs, and allow states to use these funds for innovative services for young people.

4. Expand Medicaid Eligibility and Support Through Age 26

— Extend federal funding and policy mandates to ensure all young people can access Medicaid coverage for Former Foster Care Youth (FFCC). The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) created the mandate requiring states to provide coverage for former foster care youth up to age 26. The policy was expanded to require states to cover former foster care youth who aged out of foster care in a different state. This provision must be enforced to ensure health coverage for all those affected by child welfare systems.

5. Invest in Affordable Housing

— Expanding flexibilities to include housing assistance for housing vouchers, including expanding the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) and Family Unification Programs (FUP), to prevent housing instability for emerging adults. Housing is a cornerstone of stability. Without it, young adults are at higher



risk for a range of negative outcomes, including mental health challenges, unemployment and engagement with the justice system.

6. Promote Interagency Collaboration

— Fund cross-agency coordination among housing, education, healthcare and child welfare systems to create a seamless continuum of care. Fragmented services force young adults to navigate complicated systems alone, often leading to missed opportunities and unmet needs. A coordinated approach ensures no one falls through the cracks.

7. Create Flexible Funding Mechanisms

— Amend state and local policies and practices to allow for tailored, youth-driven approaches, addressing individual needs rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. Every young person has unique needs. Flexible funding empowers agencies to create personalized support plans that drive better outcomes.

8. Maximize Title IV-E Extended Foster Care

— Title IV-E of the Social Security Act provides federal reimbursement to states for a portion of the costs of foster care for eligible young people. States can expand eligibility criteria to increase participation in EFC, improve administrative processes, and leverage the program's flexibility for placement and reentry into extended foster care.



Finally, we challenge you to imagine a different, better future for young people who experienced foster care.

- Where youth and family voices lead policy and practices. Where those with lived experience actively participate in and lead the design of programs and policies that affect their lives.
- Where child welfare systems prioritize helping young people find permanency quickly through intensive prevention, reunification and kinship care at any age. Where family and friend relationships are supported and a network of consistent, trusted adults provide long-term mentorship and guidance for young people.
- Where foster youth who don't find permanency before leaving the foster care system can receive comprehensive services through adulthood. Comprehensive and specialized services can support young adults as they begin their adult lives, including building and strengthening healthy relationships that create a strong foundation for success.

Achieving these goals requires a unified, national and state effort. Congress, the administration and state elected officials and policy makers must work in tandem with community organizations and advocates to address systemic challenges, expand proven initiatives and create a robust support system for individuals who experience foster care.

By committing to these principles and pursuing these actions, we can build a future where transition-age youth are equipped not only to survive but to succeed — where they can envision and achieve a life of stability, purpose and connection. The time to act is now, for the benefit of thousands of young adults who deserve a fair and promising path to adulthood.

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