



## Improving the Transition to Independent Adulthood

Adopted October 2012

### Overview

Youth aging out of foster care are among the most vulnerable members of our society. Most young adults who did not experience foster care rely on their families to provide a place to live, financial support, and other guidance as they enter adulthood, but we are expected to transition to adulthood without any of these supports at the age of 18. While some of us succeed despite the odds, far too many of us experience negative outcomes.

Our goal was to identify the barriers critical to our success and to develop priorities to address the gaps in services so that stakeholders in the child welfare system can improve service models so that the likelihood of success is at the same level for young adults transitioning from the foster care system as young adults who did not experience foster care.

The following priorities have been compiled using the results of discussions among the Council members and a poll administered to current and former foster youth. The priorities focus on the type of and way in which resources are provided to support youth who are preparing to age out of foster care, as well as preventative measures to help empower current foster youth to take action, increasing the likelihood that they will be successful upon leaving care.

### PRIORITIES

- **Hold states accountable for providing us with developmental and age appropriate services.** We need transitional services in order to build lasting skills that will help us in our adulthood. Some foster youth do not receive any transitional living services, and others are enrolled in the Independent Living Program but are not learning the skills they need. Many states are opting to extend the age of care in their states, which means more youth with diverse needs will be eligible to receive transitional living services. It may be necessary to develop new curriculum, which should include things like financial literacy and healthy relationships.

*Youth voice: "Although I was able to learn about different, important pieces of transitioning to college in my Independent Living Program, I didn't learn about filing taxes or writing cover letters or about life after I graduated college. I see now why so many youth struggle to graduate- the assistance they receive does not look beyond those first few months of the transition. Youth should be learning and planning for these additional transitions while they are still receiving services, and states should be required to do so."*

Former foster youth should have the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the services that should be provided to foster youth, and states should be held accountable for providing these services to transitioning foster youth.

- **Engage us in our transition plan and program. Independent Living Programs could be improved by increasing efforts to engage us in accessing services locally.** Some youth in rural communities lack access to services available in larger cities. Programs should implement a variety of engagement tools and opportunities as an alternative to the classroom or one-on-one model of independent living. Without our active engagement in our transition plans and services, our voice isn't heard in decisions that are being made.

*Youth voice: "I felt that my transition team and I were on two different pages. There was often lack of communication. And they felt like they were trying to do what was in my best interest without fully involving me in the process."*

Many youth are using the Internet for social media in addition to employment and educational requirements. The Independent Living Program could utilize Internet tools to engage with young people during their transition. Webinars, conference calls, e-mentoring, and social media are all tools that young adults are currently utilizing outside of the Independent Living Program, and these are tools that are available for program practitioners to utilize in order to engage us in the compulsory services we need during the transition to adulthood.

*Youth voice: "I am always on Webinars and online meetings for my school, and it's a lot easier for me to schedule my time around these online resources rather than ensure I can attend skills classes at times that compete with my class schedule. I often don't attend the skills classes since my school work must be priority right now."*

Furthermore, we are more likely to play an active role in our transition plan if we are involved in developing the plan from the start. Making the classes easier for us to engage in is only the first step in improving the program; we must also be asked about our own hopes and desires as well as told about what our options are in order to achieve our personal goals.

*Youth voice: "The transition process was actually planned for me and I wasn't allowed to say where I wanted to go -- the details were worked out by my placement team."*

- **Engage our foster parents in our transition plan and program.** Foster parents play an integral role during our transition to adulthood and could be used as a resource for teaching us the skills that young adults in non-foster homes are learning from their parents. Additionally, our foster parents know our skills before we do and their input is important to consider during planning.

*Youth voice: "My foster parents were able to see that I was passionate about writing but not able to get along with my educators in writing classes like journalism, reading, and research. They taught me some important skills with interacting with others that are different from me in order to achieve my goals and I still value those skills today. They also taught me how to use a coffee machine to make hot chocolate and how to safely navigate the Internet during*

*my search for my biological family. I didn't learn these skills from school or independent living classes."*

Foster parents should be trained on the skills we need to know for our transition and help us learn what to expect and what to plan for. They should also tell us how involved they plan on being during our transition to adulthood so that we know whom we can turn to for help when we need it.

- **Assess our eligibility for Independent Living Services earlier and start planning with us earlier.** Independent Living Program assessments should start as early as age 14, or two years prior to aging out of foster care. Youth in non-foster care settings start planning for their future during this period and Independent Living Programs should reflect this. Transitional planning starts at 90 days prior to aging out of care, and we think that this does not allow enough time to adequately ensure that all service needs are in place. Planning meetings should be held at least once every three months, starting no later than two years prior to emancipation, and monthly during the year prior to emancipation.
- **Ensure our transition reflects our diverse cultural needs.** We all have different needs and many of these needs reflect the cultures and identities we adopt for ourselves. Our religious and spiritual beliefs as well as our backgrounds and environments should be considered during transition planning. Specific attention should be paid to native youth and the tribal resources offered to them to include the management of money those young people receive from tribes. As the transition process occurs, youth who identify with a particular culture or heritage should be engaged in a peer assisted learning environment that fosters and maintains the development of meaningful relationships with their cultural heritage.
- **Train us for interacting with all systems we will need during our transition.** During our transition, we interact with the same systems we did while were in care (for example, physical health, mental health, housing, education, and, in some cases, the juvenile justice system). If youth are truly going to be prepared for life after foster care, members of each system will need to be included in the transition planning process.

Transition plans should include education for youth in these systems to teach a series of life skills that will ensure that they will understand how to access and navigate multiple systems. This will allow systems to create transition plans that meet all of the youth's needs prior to leaving care, while avoiding duplication of services within the system.

- **Tell us all of our options and available services during our transition plan.** Many of us are not a part of the transition planning process and because of this, we do not know about our options. Sometimes we are asked about what we would like to do, but this assumes that we know our options when we might not. For example, many youth plan to attend college after high school, but do not know that they might be able to graduate high school early or attend community college.

*Youth voice: "My social worker didn't provide or offer any opportunities that were available to foster care kids to me. I found out a lot of resources were available only after it was too late to apply or receive them."*

We need to know about our options, including what the process would look like in pursuing each option. This information will help us make thoughtful and informed decisions about our lives and actively engage us in our transition to adulthood.

*Youth voice: "I could not afford the only year round on campus housing option my school provided. I had to couch surf during winter break and encountered a few unsafe situations."*

By educating us on all of our options during the transition to adulthood, as well as the steps need to pursue those goals, we will be able to avoid common negative outcomes and experiences like homelessness and vulnerabilities.

- **Give us access to our health records and history, and assess our health needs before our transition.** Educate us on how to navigate the health care system. While in foster care, all of our health needs are taken care of with little input from us. We often do not understand the complexities of health care, including how often we need to see a doctor or dentist, how to choose a physician, or how to make sure that our medical needs are covered by insurance.

*Youth voice: "I left care and my emotional state was still in shambles and I had no clue that I was eligible to have a therapist. When I did find out that I was eligible for therapy I was told that even if I went to a therapist I was getting that aspect of my insurance cut in a few months, so even though I need mental health services I was no longer going to be able to receive those services."*

Additionally, services such as counseling, psychiatric services, and psychotropic medications are all too common with the foster care population. If we are not prepared to navigate these complex systems prior to leaving care and do not receive support during our transition, many of our needs may go unmet.

We should have access to our full mental and physical health history and, prior to leaving care, a full physical and mental evaluation should occur with recommendations for continued care. Transitional living courses should include information on how to access physical and mental health records and services. We should be included in any recommendations about our health and we should have a decision in our treatment options, including psychotropic medications.

- **Give us access to health coverage for two years after we transition out of foster care.** Most foster youth lose their health coverage during the transition to adulthood. This is because we didn't learn about the steps we needed to take in order to keep or start a new coverage plan. Although our health coverage stops during our transition, our medical needs do not.

*Youth voice: "I wish my social worker would have helped me fill out forms to receive medical coverage after aging out. I had no knowledge that my medical benefits would be cut off the day I turned 18. Therefore I had a lapse in medical services, which was difficult for me"*

*because I was seeing a therapist and psychiatrist for medication. After my medical coverage was terminated, I ran out of medication and got very ill due to withdrawals from the medication.”*

We should be covered by our health plans during the two years after we transition to adulthood, just as many non-foster youth remain on their parents’ plans until age 26. Although we are no longer in foster care after successfully completing our transition plan, we should have continued coverage until we are able to obtain health coverage on our own.

- **Teach us employment skills during our transition to adulthood.** In addition to independent living skills offered through transitional living programs, we also need to acquire job skills prior to our transition to adulthood. Many non-foster youth hold jobs during their final years in high school, but foster youth face many barriers and restrictions to working while in state care. We want to work while in foster care, and having a job before the transition to adulthood will help us have a smoother transition and save money for independent living.

*Youth voice: “The current job programs for youth that are not AmeriCorps or Job Corps are nearly non-existent for youth today. Workforce Center services are available but they like to take only those youth who are the most likely to succeed, not necessarily those who are more difficult to serve and who their outcomes are not as great. Chafee services help youth learn skills and help youth get into the community to actually obtain employment. More one-on-one help for youth looking for employment is helpful.”*

A thorough assessment needs to be completed to determine our specific needs. As a part of our transition plan, we should be provided with options to enroll in employment service programs, internships, or volunteer programs to help us to gain skills we will need in the workforce.

- **Ensure we have the vital documents we need in our transition to adulthood.** It is vital that we have documents commonly associated with adulthood prior to leaving foster care. At a minimum, we need a state issued identification card, a copy of their social security card, proof of independent student status for financial aid verification purposes, a copy of our birth certificate, copies of our medical (physical and mental health) records, as well as education records.

The ACF should recognize and elevate exemplary models and processes already addressing the need for documentation support. This work group recognizes one model in particular, The Ohio Universal Transition Plan, which is a secure online vault for youth documents including those mentioned above.



*About the Council: The National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Council convenes to provide federal stakeholders with relevant and timely information as policies and procedures are created that will affect children and families throughout the country. The Council represents a collective viewpoint of youth and alumni who have personal experience in the child welfare system. The Council is a partnership between Foster Care Alumni of America and FosterClub, with generous support from Casey Family Programs. Visit us online at [www.nationalpolicycouncil.org](http://www.nationalpolicycouncil.org).*