



Preventing Homelessness Among Young Adults from Foster Care

Adopted October 2015

Overview

This year the National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council chose homelessness among young adults from foster care as a priority focus area. Council members referred to research, best practices, personal experiences with homelessness, and poll results to create priorities around preventing homelessness among young adults from foster care. The Council intends to use this information to educate public leaders, policy makers and the larger child welfare community. In describing and drawing from our personal experiences and those who were polled, the Council is uniquely positioned to call attention to challenges and unmet needs facing foster youth and alumni.

Research on the rates of homelessness for young adults from foster care indicates that about one in three foster youth will experience homelessness after leaving care, making it clear that homelessness is a very serious issue among our peers. For the poll, the Council defined a homeless youth as an unaccompanied young person, between the ages of 12 and 24, without consistent family support who is living in shelters, on the streets, in cars or vacant buildings, or who is “couch surfing”, or living in other unstable circumstances.

Based on the Council’s poll of 108 foster care alumni, 67 percent had experienced homelessness. Of those, more than half experienced homelessness before the age of 19. Though not an empirical study, the poll results provided interesting insight in guiding our priorities for preventing homelessness among former foster youth. Our poll showed that once young adults from foster care became homeless, they often experience hunger, depression or anxiety, use drugs and alcohol, and/or engaged in survival sex.

The Council believes there is a compelling need for federal and local governments and communities to immediately address the root causes of homelessness among transition-aged youth from foster care. Some of the barriers that leave us vulnerable to homelessness are:

- Lack of family support
- Lack of a job or opportunities for legal employment
- Lack of savings or banking experience
- Lack of affordable housing, particularly within cities
- Not being aware of low-income housing resources
- Strict landlord requirements on:
 - Income or co-signers
 - Rental and credit history
 - Security deposits and other up-front costs

Based on all of the above information and through much deliberation between Council members, our priorities to prevent homelessness among our peers fell into four primary areas:

- 1) Affordable, long-term housing
- 2) Employment and education
- 3) Early planning, saving and financial stability
- 4) Emergency support

AFFORDABLE, LONG-TERM HOUSING

Our poll showed that only 38 percent of alumni who experienced homelessness applied for public housing. Of those who did not apply, half said it was because they didn't know how. For people who do apply for public housing, waitlists can be as long as 24 months; 42 percent of our poll respondents who applied for public housing stated that they were denied services. With traditional forms of public housing being out of reach for young people from foster care, the Council believes that transitioning foster youth need more affordable, long-term housing options.

- **Be proactive when helping us explore our housing options.** Keep us aware of those options well in advance of our transition planning to help ensure that we are able to pursue them. We would like to be informed about affordable housing at least six months before we exit care.
 - Our housing should contribute positively to our developing personal identities, without fear of penalty from agents of the housing or child welfare systems. Such housing should be mindful of our developing cultural identities, disability status, gender expression and sexual orientation.
 - We should be at the top of all housing resources across departments. Based on our high vulnerability to homelessness, we should be identified, screened, and given priority status for all housing.
 - We need more flexibility with the time frame to use public housing vouchers. We do not want to be dependent on public housing, but a shorter voucher time frame does not allow us enough time to stabilize financially, save money to pay for housing, earn a college or other post-secondary degree, or find employment. Housing vouchers should allow for the maximum time flexibility and should be in line with typical lease times of 12 months. Housing vouchers should be offered to us in combination with independent living coaching and other services like employment support and financial literacy.

- **Be accountable for our housing needs when no other options are available.** Due to susceptibility to homelessness after age 21, we would like service agencies to help pay for housing if no other housing options are available when we leave foster care.
 - Housing for young adults from foster care should be provided through age 26, since many non-foster youth live with their families until this age.
 - Our information should not be lost between systems. Federal and local agencies should share public housing resource information regularly to help ensure we are aware of and able to pursue these housing options.
 - We would like further evaluation of Extended Foster Care to ensure that our placements keep us off the streets. Many states with extended foster care lack a sophisticated infrastructure for recruiting and retaining caregivers that will take older youth in extended foster care into their homes. As a result we are often put into compromising situations

where we are left with little support. Conflicts within the placement may then result in housing insecurity followed by a less serious response from local and state child welfare administrations for older youth than younger youth.

Youth voice: "I'm currently receiving the FUP [Family Unification Program] voucher, and I'm at the end of the 18 months. I'm working really hard, building permanent connections, but the cost of living is skyrocketing. I feel nervous because I don't know where to move, and I don't feel that prepared. It hasn't given me time to save up a lot of money. If there were no limits, I'd be able to save some more. I don't want to rely on the FUP voucher. I want to be sustainable. But I need to have a plan, a good network, a job and finish my education."

Youth voice: "I used the Section 8 voucher and I feel that I wouldn't be where I am today without it. I used it for 7 years from emancipation until I graduated from college. I took myself off of housing once I got a great job ... During the time I was on Section 8, I also participated in a self-sufficiency program, and the whole time you are in the program, they put money away into an account for you. By the time I finished my 5 years in the program, I had enough money to purchase a home. It was a wonderful program that helped me truly achieve permanent housing."

EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

- **Allow us to have meaningful employment opportunities at age 16.** It's common for teenagers to work while in high school, yet many foster youth are not allowed to work while in foster care. We need the opportunity to work and build up savings before exiting care. We should be encouraged to seek employment by age 16, especially foster youth in congregate care, so we can gain the experience of working and saving before exiting care.

Youth voice: "Not everyone is ready to head to college. They are trying to survive. There should be other options like apprenticeships, trade schools, local businesses to work for. The choice should really resonate with what that young person wants to do."

In the poll, our peers shared that after becoming homeless, it was harder to stay in school. They reported that college, including financial assistance and housing, was effective to avoid homelessness. But college is not the right choice for every young adult from care. Further, a number of people reported that dorm closures during holidays and breaks sent them back into temporary homelessness while in college. Here are the Council's priorities related to education to prevent homelessness:

- **Help us explore different vocational options.** We believe child welfare workers should collaborate with Workforce Investment Programs by referring us to vocational, trade school, and workforce development services by age 16.
- **Give us support and guidance for our educational goals.** Depending on the interest and skills of each foster youth, we should receive support and guidance in applying for educational enhancements with college and scholarships.

Youth voice: "I started skipping school because I was too worried about where I would sleep that night."

Youth voice: "Homelessness is preventable with foster youth. It does not have to happen. I was homeless because you couldn't stay in dorms during the summer or break and I didn't have anywhere else to go. That could have been prevented, yet it wasn't."

EARLY PLANNING, SAVING AND FINANCIAL STABILITY

Preventing homelessness among our peers requires early and concrete planning with a young person in foster care based on their individual needs and local resources. Our poll showed that homelessness was more common for alumni who received NO training for independent living, and it was less common for those who received in-home preparation for independent living. Independent living services do not always provide tailored support of concrete skills needed for successful emancipation, like assistance securing housing and a job. Further, more than half of our poll respondents who had experienced homelessness said that they ended up homeless because they had no savings.

- **Teach us how to save money in order to be financially stable when exiting care.** We should be encouraged to begin saving by age 14, and we should not be penalized for savings we build up. Before exiting we need help (as do our landlords) to know what counts as income. The federal government should provide a tool that reflects the unique diversity of income that foster youth may have (Student Aid, Independent Living Dollars, Employment, IDA dollars, Extended Foster Care Payments, etc.). This Unified Income paperwork would be a great tool in helping us know what housing we are eligible for and would give our housing providers a better idea of our financial situation.
- **Provide resources and help us develop skills to be independent and self-sufficient.** We want to learn independent living skills in our home with trained and supported caregivers while receiving coaching in hard and soft skills.

Youth voice: "I was really confused about what my income was when I first tried to get an apartment and I didn't know how to have that discussion with a landlord. I ended up being rejected by several apartments as a result but later found out that my income from school, work, and other resources was more than adequate income for most of the places I applied to."

Youth voice: "When you take independent living classes, you learn the basics; you don't learn how to lease an apartment, how to interview for a job, or how to apply for financial aid. Because we don't have this knowledge, we often end up struggling for the first couple of years after we leave foster care."

Youth voice: "If we had these discussions at the beginning of high school, instead of blowing all my money when I was 15 and started working, I would have been more sustainable when I emancipated."

EMERGENCY SUPPORT

Despite best intentions and programming, some of our peers from care are going to need emergency support when a crisis arises because they don't have strong safety nets. Young people who took our poll reported that they felt unsafe staying in adult shelters, often in areas with high crime or violence, and where they had to sleep in open dormitories. Further, they shared that birth siblings were the most common person to help them in a housing crisis, indicating that the sibling relationship can play an important role in helping us avoid homelessness.

- **We need youth shelters to be safe and secure, not just a roof.** These should be located in safe neighborhoods, include only young adults 26 and under, and should have rooms with doors that lock as opposed to large dormitories. We also need the shelters to be a resource for receiving mail so that we can apply for jobs and permanent housing.

- **Allow us to make mistakes and not lose housing.** Reconsider “zero-tolerance” programs. As young people, we know that for some of our peers, the only way they will learn and grow is by making mistakes, many of which may involve substance use. We believe that these mistakes should not create housing instability for those of us in need of emergency or transitional housing.

- **We need access to financial assistance for emergencies until age 26.** Because we don't have a safety net, we encourage programs that match foster youth savings, such as individual development accounts, to provide emergency financial assistance, accompanied by financial literacy training.

Youth voice: “I was living in a room with over a hundred men, most of whom were lost in some addiction. Some would shoot up in plain sight and smoke crack.”

Youth voice: “My IDA account was my safety net. Whenever I had to move they would match the \$1,000 I put in my account. That was my safety net up until age 24.”

Youth voice: “I finally got stable housing at 24 with my sister co-signing. I'm still struggling to keep my apartment but so far so good.”

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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.