

Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care

**An AYPF
Policy Brief**

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Policy Forum**

About AYPF

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) is a non-partisan convener based in Washington, DC. We bring policymakers, practitioners, and researchers together and help to frame issues, inform policy, and create conversations about improving education and young people's lives. AYPF's goal is to enable participants to become more effective in the development, enactment, and implementation of sound policies affecting the nation's young people by providing information, insights, and networks to better understand the development of healthy and successful young people, productive workers, and participating citizens in a democratic society. AYPF does not lobby or advocate for positions on pending legislation. Rather, we believe that greater intellectual and experiential knowledge of youth issues will lead to sounder, more informed policymaking. We strive to generate a climate of constructive action by enhancing communication, understanding, and trust among youth policy professionals.

Founded in 1993, AYPF has interacted with thousands of policymakers by conducting an average of 40 annual events such as lunchtime forums, out-of-town study tours, and policy-focused discussion groups. Participants include Congressional staff; federal, state, and local government officials; national nonprofit and advocacy association professionals; and the press corps. At forums, these professionals interact with renowned thinkers, researchers, and practitioners to learn about national and local strategies for formal and informal education, career preparation, and the development of youth as resources through service and skill development activities. Study tour participants visit schools undergoing comprehensive reforms, afterschool and community learning sites, and youth employment and training centers, where they learn experientially from the young people and adults in the field.

AYPF focuses on three overlapping themes: Education, Youth Development and Community Involvement, and Preparation for Careers and Workforce Development. AYPF publishes a variety of nationally disseminated youth policy reports and materials, many of which may be viewed on our website: (www.aypf.org).

Executive Summary

What happens to youth in foster care when they turn 18? Many face unprecedented challenges like homelessness, lack of financial resources, difficulty accessing educational opportunities, and unemployment. In this issue brief, The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) documented these challenges and opportunities in three distinct yet overlapping areas of need:

- Sustainable Social Capital
- Permanency Supports
- Postsecondary Opportunities

For each area of need, we defined the challenges youth face and identified promising programs and policies that are in place to help them transition from foster care to a healthy, successful adult life.

Sustainable Social Capital

The ability to navigate resources, build relationships, and develop a community is sustainable social capital. Youth in transition from foster care often lack these critical support networks and healthy relationships that are an important stepping stone to independence. In our brief, we document programs and policies that emphasize strong connections with a supportive adult, developmentally appropriate services, and opportunities for youth voice in transitional planning. This section highlights Youth Villages Transitional Living Program, Southern California's Foster Family and Adoption Agency, and the Oregon Foster Youth Connection.

Permanency Supports

Resources like housing, transportation, and healthcare are difficult for youth in transition from foster care to access and maintain. Many find themselves homeless, without reliable transportation, and unable to access necessary medical care. Without these supports, youth in transition from foster care cannot maintain other important elements of their transition such as education and employment. In our brief, we document the research, programs, and policies that are connecting youth in transition from foster care to permanency supports. We highlight Covenant House, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, John Burton Foundation's California Transitional Housing Program, and the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare.

Postsecondary Opportunities

Youth in transition from foster care should know about and be able to access a range of postsecondary opportunities, including two-year and four-year education as well as workforce training programs. They face challenges when applying because of confusing

paperwork or burdensome financial requirements. Of those who enroll in a four-year college, less than 10% go on to complete their education because of persistent difficulties. Programs and policies are successfully engaging youth early in the planning process and supporting them throughout their postsecondary endeavors. In addition to several state-level postsecondary funding policies, we highlight the MPowering My Success Program at the University of Michigan – Flint, Foster Forward in Rhode Island, and Guardian Scholars. The brief also provides several recommendations and takeaways for policymakers at the federal and state levels, service providers, researchers and others.

Increase Investments

The 26,000 youth who transition out of foster care each year represent 26,000 opportunities for investment. Policymakers at the federal and state levels should consider how current resources are being utilized in order for these young people to access postsecondary opportunities, including sustainable social capital, permanency supports, and connections to education and the workforce.

Highlight the Existing Range of Postsecondary Options

Foster youth access a range of options as they pursue postsecondary education, including two-year college programs, four-year universities, and workforce training programs. Youth in transition from foster care should be informed of this range of options.

Systems Coordination

With so many services overlapping at different times, it is difficult for young people to understand and manage their transition in a way that ultimately empowers them to be successful, independent adults. When the education, housing, health, and workforce systems work collaboratively at the national, state, and local levels, youth are better served. Coordinating services reduces burdens on youth by making it easier to access services, and it creates more positive outcomes by strengthening results and accountability. Systems coordination is especially important during “transition points” for youth from foster care.

Develop Professional Capacity

All adults who work with youth in transition from foster care must be equipped to help young people navigate the multiple systems which with they interact. Professionals who manage the systems that serve youth from foster care must possess the knowledge needed to coordinate these services across systems and agencies.

Engage Youth in Decision-Making

Young people are the experts on their experiences and have ideas about improving their own opportunities. Policymakers at all levels should engage youth in conversations and decisions about creating access to postsecondary opportunities. This means not just asking youth for their input, but listening to their feedback and considering ways to implement their ideas.

Change the Conversation

The conversation must shift from simply “transitioning out of foster care” to “transitioning *to opportunities.*” It is critical that youth in foster care know and understand the possibilities for their future. AYPF believes these options include two-year or four-year education, workforce training programs, or employment opportunities that support youth on the path to becoming civically engaged, having a career with a family-sustaining wage, and remaining lifelong learners. To communicate this goal, conversations should be broadened to include stakeholders from child welfare agencies, educational institutions and systems, housing systems, local programs, workforce representatives, court systems, and others.

Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care

I: Introduction

“People think being in foster care is cut and dry, but that’s not really true.” A young college student from Youth Villages explained that she did not become involved with the child welfare system until her senior year of high school when she was unexpectedly left without parents. “People watch these movies and think that being in foster care means one thing, and only one thing, but it can mean a lot of different things to different people.” – Sherika, Youth Villages

Every year in the United States there are nearly half a million children and youth in foster care. Over 26,000 of them will “age out” of the system.¹ These eighteen-year-olds must navigate the new challenges of adulthood without the traditional support system – parents to ask for help, connections in the community to access jobs, or even a home to go to – that many others have. Fortunately, as states have extended the age of foster care eligibility, these young people have increasing access to resources that can support them as they transition into adulthood. Still, more can be done to create access to postsecondary opportunities and lifelong success for youth in transition from foster care.

In order to help inform and improve the transition of foster youth to postsecondary opportunities, this publication addresses the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by youth in transition from foster care, and how are policies and programs responding to these challenges?
2. How are states implementing policies that support postsecondary opportunities for youth in transition from foster care?
3. How should systems coordinate and respond to the needs of youth in transition from foster care?
4. What should researchers, policymakers, and practitioners do to strengthen access to postsecondary opportunities for youth in transition from foster care?

Challenges Faced by Youth in Transition from Foster Care

AYPF believes the goal for all youth is to be lifelong learners, civically engaged, and to hold jobs with a family-sustaining wage. To accomplish this, we believe that all youth should have access to postsecondary opportunities, whether that means attending a two-year or four-year institution or a workforce training program, joining the military, or serving an apprenticeship. However, many youth face challenges and obstacles that prevent them from navigating and accessing these

opportunities. Youth in transition from foster care are one such population, and the challenges they face are unique.

In 2012, there were 73,900 youth ages 16 to 20 in the foster care system nationwide. These young people made up 19 percent of all children and youth in foster care.² Approximately 26,000 youth (10 percent) are legally emancipated each year, meaning they leave foster care without continued guardianship by the government.³

Youth exiting foster care through emancipation, runaway, or transfer to another agency may face additional obstacles compared to children and youth who exit care through reunification with a parent or other caretaker (51 percent of all exits), adoption (21 percent of all exits), or living with other relatives (eight percent of all exits).⁴ Youth who exit on their own must quickly learn how to take care of themselves emotionally, physically, and financially and consider their long term plans for education and careers. Youth who exit foster care are more likely than their peers to drop out of high school, be unemployed or homeless, experience physical and mental health problems, lack health insurance, use illegal drugs, become teen parents, and have encounters with the justice system.⁵

Policy Landscape

In recent years Federal policies have become more responsive to the needs of youth in transition from foster care. Still, more needs to be done to create access to postsecondary opportunities for this population. This section will provide an overview of policies that affect youth in transition from foster care and outline how states are taking advantage of them.

Table 1: Federal Policies That Can Be Used to Support Youth in Transition from Foster Care

| Policy | Year Enacted | Administering Agency | Purpose |
|--|---------------------|--|---|
| Medicaid | 1965 (2010) | U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) – Center for Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) Services, in partnership with states | Initially, health coverage was provided to former foster youth until age 21. Through the Affordable Care Act this coverage was extended to age 26, regardless of youth’s income. ⁶ |
| Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) | 1996 | HHS – Administration for Children and Families | TANF funds can be used by states to provide assistance and services to young foster care teens who are pregnant or parenting. ⁷ |

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| Supplemental Security Income (SSI) | 1972 | Social Security Administration | Provides temporary income to youth who transition out of foster care if they meet the adult criteria for disabilities. ⁸ |
| Title IV-E of the Social Security Act | 1980 | HHS – Administration for Children and Families | Title IV-E is the major federal source of funding for the administration of child welfare services across states. Funds are used to provide administrative services, staff training, recruitment of foster parents, and management of data systems. ⁹ |
| McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act | 1987 (1994) | United States Department of Education (ED) | The McKinney-Vento Act is meant to ensure educational stability for both homeless and foster youth. ¹⁰ |
| John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program | 1999 | HHS – Administration for Children and Families (ACF) | Grants are offered to states to implement services and activities that will ultimately lead to independence and self-sufficiency for current or former foster youth. ¹¹ |
| Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act | 2008 | Children’s Bureau Implementation Centers | Allows states to extend foster care and associated benefits up to age 21 by providing Federal funding to states and counties. ¹² |
| The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) – Previously “Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974” ¹³ | 2008 | Family and Youth Services Bureau | RHYA programs provide runaway youth with services, help reunify them with their families, and develop the skills needed to live independently. RHYA programs also work to address the needs of homeless youth. ¹⁴ |
| Uninterrupted Scholars Act (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act amendment) | 2013 | ED | This amendment to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) gives caseworkers access to information and records of children and youth in foster care. This helps child welfare systems meet the requirement of maintaining up-to-date records, including academic records. It also allows for smoother transitions |

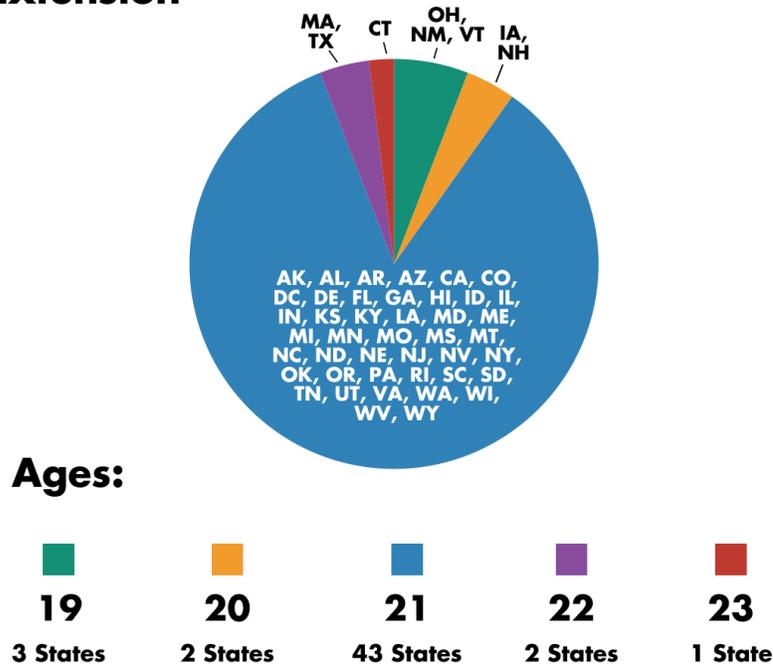
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| | | | between schools for students in foster care, as caseworkers can more easily transfer their records. ¹⁵ |
| Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act | 2014 | State Agencies report to Health and Human Services (HHS) | State agencies must identify, document, and determine services for children and youth at risk of sex trafficking. HHS must be informed of instances of sex trafficking and this data be included in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Children and youth who run away from foster care must be located. ¹⁶ |

This chart illustrates the variety of policy opportunities available to programs and agencies that serve youth in transition from foster care. Noticeably, these policies originate from multiple agencies and are administered by multiple systems across states. This underscores the need for coordination across systems that serve this population.

State Variation

A young person transitioning out of foster care might be eligible for different services depending upon the state in which he or she resides. Nearly every state now extends benefits to youth in foster care past the age of 18 and up to age 21 with federal Title IV-E funding. There is variation across states in terms of how long services are made available to young people and which services are extended. A small number of states also choose to make some services available to youth past age 21. Chart 1 illustrates the number of states that extend at least one service to youth in foster care, by age. For a more detailed breakdown of state and federal requirements around youth’s eligibility for extended services, see Appendix 1.

Number of States That Extend at Least One Foster Care Service, by Age of Extension



Opportunities to Support Youth in Transition from Foster Care

What’s next for youth in foster care who turn 18? Many will struggle to access postsecondary education, find housing, secure employment, and transition successfully into adulthood. This does not have to be the case, and state and program leaders are thinking more strategically about creating access to opportunities for youth as they transition from foster care to postsecondary education, the workforce, and a healthy adult life.

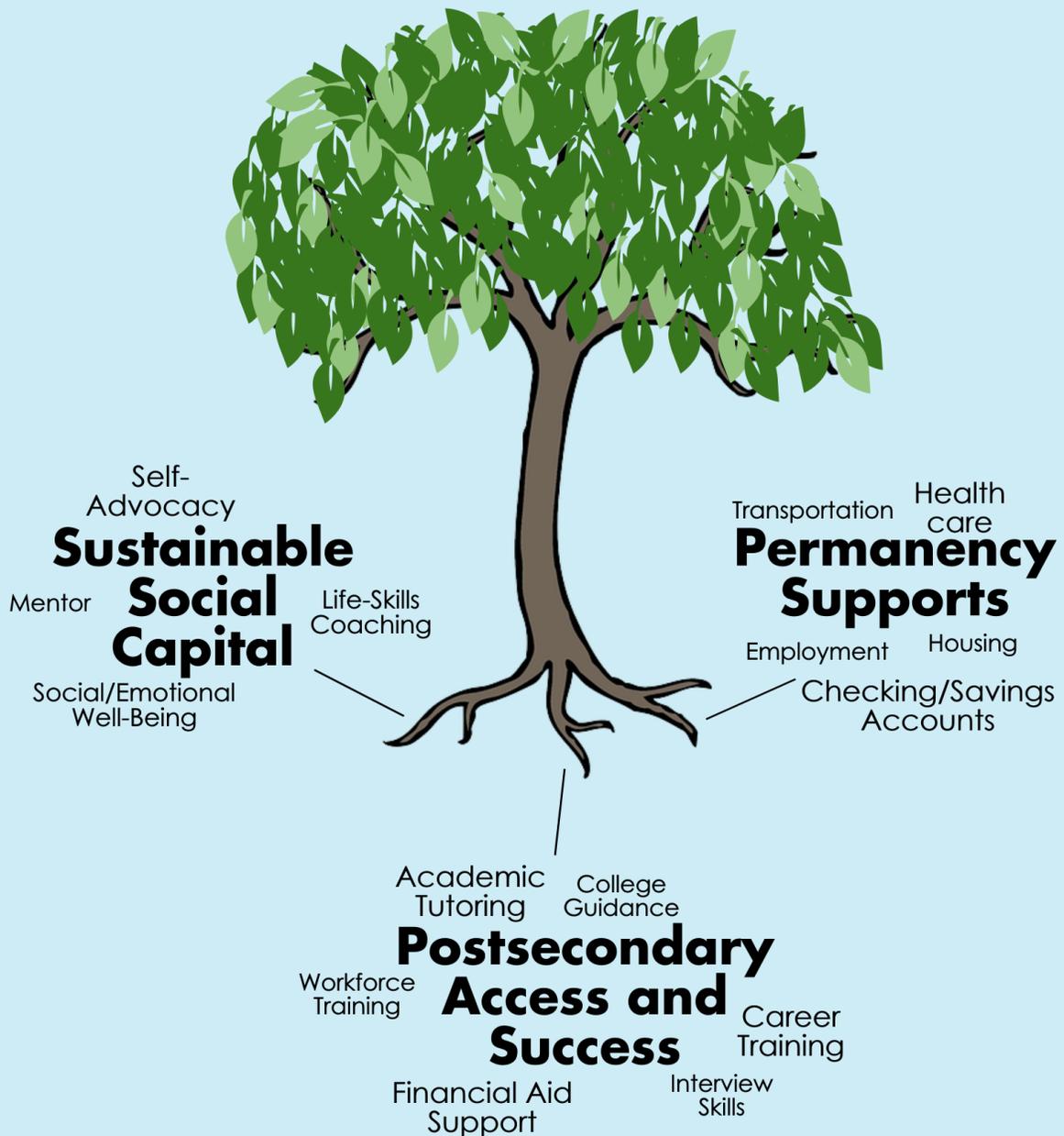
Groundwork of Support

AYPF has identified three areas of support that we believe encompass the opportunities for success and growth for youth in transition from foster care:

- *Sustainable Social Capital* – Youth in transition from foster care often benefit from knowing where to begin on their path to independence. Policies and programs that promote the development of a young person’s social capital encourage comprehensive and individualized services with knowledgeable and trained staff to equip youth from foster care with the skills needed to advocate for themselves and navigate the challenges of education, housing, employment, and other supports. The connections to community that youth develop are just as important as the resources they learn to access as part of sustainable social capital.
- *Permanency Supports* – Research indicates that youth in transition from foster care struggle to access and maintain safe, stable housing and other permanency supports. This adversely affects their ability to succeed in workforce and educational endeavors. Policymakers and program providers are considering ways to increase access to basic and immediate needs, like housing, transportation, healthcare, and financial resources (such as checking and savings accounts).
- *Postsecondary Opportunities* – Youth from foster care face many obstacles as they try to access postsecondary education and career opportunities. Policies and programs should acknowledge their unique circumstances, including interruptions during K-12 education and lack of physical, social, and emotional support networks. These young people benefit from pathways that allow them to access two and four-year education and workforce training programs, with supports to promote success.

These three foundations of support do not work in isolation. Youth in transition from foster care often need support from all three at any given moment in time. Together, these three roots of support – sustainable social capital, permanency supports, and postsecondary opportunities – create the foundation for a strong, successful, independent adult life.

Youth in Transition from Foster Care: Opportunity and Access



II. Sustainable Social Capital

"It is the first time that I have experienced feeling whole-heartedly wanted, and not like I'm a burden or an obligation. I now recognize my own value and abilities more than I've allowed myself to in the past...I feel 'a part' of something instead of feeling like I'm being 'taken from' relationships."

– Angelica, 23, Foster Alumni Co-Mentoring Experience

The Challenge

If you are an 18-year-old suddenly on your own, without a family or support system, how do you navigate living in today's complex world? How do you get a driver's license or an I.D. card? What do you buy at the grocery store in order to last you a week? How do you file taxes? How do you cope with a stressful relationship? Many young adults experience frustration at some point with these questions, but youth who transition out of foster care face additional challenges that make it difficult for them to master these circumstances. They have often experienced multiple out-of-home placements, traumatic experiences, and lack an adult to help guide them through their transition. These events make it difficult for youth to cope with and navigate the challenges that come with decision-making, relationships, and adulthood.

What is Sustainable Social Capital?

Youth in transition from foster care benefit from comprehensive and individualized services that address their physical, emotional, and intellectual needs, including trauma-informed adult guidance to help them advocate for themselves and eventually access postsecondary opportunities.¹⁷ Importantly, these young people also need connections to a caring community who can provide support as they learn to navigate challenges on their own. Collectively, the skills, resources, and community needed to access and navigate these opportunities, ultimately empowering young people to advocate for themselves, can be called *social capital*.¹⁸

The process of leaving foster care to become an independent adult is gradual and requires supports that are developmentally appropriate. For example, some youth who are younger or who have experienced more traumatic events might need more opportunities to build their social capital. As youth mature and develop, they will eventually be able to access, build, and sustain their own networks and communities of resources. Ultimately, the goal is for all youth from foster care to independently connect to resources, groups, and communities that have strong social capital and that will support that young person going forward.

Investment in foster youth's social capital will lead to positive outcomes in other areas like education, housing, and employment. Programs that serve youth in transition from foster care accomplish this by nourishing young people's social development, mental health, and physical and emotional well-being. Youth transitioning out of foster care benefit from opportunities that provide a range of experiences for learning how to transition into independent living. For example:

- Some young people might have children of their own and need guidance on parenting skills.
- Others may experience difficulty coping with a traumatic past and require more intensive counseling supports, including trauma-informed therapy.
- Some youth might not have practice in basic living skills, like cooking a meal or doing laundry.
- Some young people experience all of these challenges, and all youth benefit from learning how to communicate what they need in order to advocate for themselves.

Barriers to Building Sustainable Social Capital

Providing services and programs that support youth as they develop their own social capital is not without challenges. First, youth need guidance from highly qualified professionals who have the capacity to offer developmentally appropriate services and supports. Additionally, youth often benefit when information is shared between programs and systems, but this does not often happen in a timely manner, or at all.

Mentoring to Support Youth Social Capital

Many independent living programs and services carry out investment in youth's social capital through individual mentoring. Building relationships with young people produces positive effects on their social, emotional, and academic outcomes.¹⁹ Put simply and in the words of one young person from foster care, "Someone believed in me, now I believe in myself."²⁰ Creating access to and building positive mentoring relationships with youth in transition from foster care is especially important. Because many young people have experienced traumatic and other adverse events, it is important to make a good match between mentors and youth.²¹ Given the unique circumstances youth face, mentors should be equipped to connect youth to a range of developmentally appropriate services, such as trauma-informed therapy training. Trauma-informed practice allows adults to understand the impact trauma has on youths' current functioning and recognize when systems are adding to this trauma. Adults using trauma-informed practice can provide better support for healthy recovery and optimal brain development.²² Adults who work with youth from foster care must also know when a youth needs assistance from public services and help connect that young person to those services that youth might need assistance with.

Examples of Building Social Capital

States are strengthening access to sustainable social capital for youth in transition from foster care. The examples below highlight actions from state agencies, local programs, collaborative partnerships, and youth themselves.

Thoughtful Mentoring and Skill Building

Southern California Foster Family and Adoption Agency seeks to help the children and youth in their care become independent and successful adults. Their Youth in Transition Program is comprised of Foster Alumni Co-Mentoring Experience (FACE), an Internship Program, and a summer Performing Arts Program.²³ These opportunities give youth transitioning out of foster care a safe place where they can meet with caring adults in one-on-one or group settings, develop and improve skills through internships, and learn new ways to express themselves through acting. In the words of one young person:

“Co-mentoring has allowed me to put trust in others again and to not be so critical about myself. I have accepted that there are some things that I can’t change, while working hard to modify other areas of my life. Since joining the group, I am less lonely. I feel like I have a voice that can and will be heard, and I feel more connected to the larger community.” – Bert, 21, FACE

One outcome of the internship program was a cellular phone application, *Foster Adopt Resources in L.A.*²⁴ Youth who participated in the Internship Program developed this app to help other foster care youth have easy access to helpful tips, how-to guides, resources (such as therapy and housing), testimonials, and fun quizzes.

Youth as Advocates for Themselves

Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC) is a statewide advocacy group that is completely led by current and former foster youth ages 14 to 25.²⁵ OFYC, with support from Children First for Oregon (CFFO) and training from Foster Youth in Action (FYA), trains youth to actively participate in policies, programs, and practices that improve the lives of children and youth in foster care. OFYC focuses on empowering their youth to advocate, participate in activism, and become leaders. OFYC also informs youth formerly in foster care on their rights and provides access to housing, education, health care, legal, mentoring, advocacy, and internship resources.

Mentoring Towards Independence

Youth Villages is a private and government funded organization that aims to assist youth transitioning out of foster care through their Transitional Living program.²⁶ This program has been reviewed both internally and externally to ensure that Youth Villages is providing the best support possible.^{27, 28} Through the Transitional Living program, youth work with specialists who help them find safe housing, achieve stable employment, continue their education or get job training, reunite with birth families if possible, build healthy adult support systems, and learn to manage their physical and mental health issues. Internal measures of the Transitional Living program’s success include²⁹:

- Eighty-four percent of youth are either living independently or with family two years after program completion.

- Eighty-three percent of youth are in school, graduated, or employed two years after completing the program.
- Seventy-seven percent of youth had no involvement with the law within the two years after completing the program.

An initial, external report on Youth Villages' Transitional Living program has been released. A second report about the program's impact on youth one year after completing Transitional Living will be released in 2015.³⁰

Summary Points

- Youth in transition from foster care face multiple barriers to postsecondary success. In many cases, acquiring the knowledge and skills to manage those barriers is just as important as solving specific challenges.
- Programs that provide comprehensive services to help youth in transition from foster care to build sustainable social capital should have the capacity to respond to a variety of needs.
- Professionals must be able to work directly with youth (trauma-informed therapy, mentoring, etc.), as well as assist youth as they navigate the larger system of resources available to them.
- Adults who work directly with youth must also communicate across multiple systems to help youth access the services they need. This requires informed caseworkers, mentors, independent living coordinators, and the like.

III. Permanency Supports/Supports for Independent Living

"When I was 12 years old, I was taken away from my mom...After we were taken away, I lived in the group home for awhile and eventually in 3 different foster care homes. When I turned 18, my foster care ended and I had to figure things out for myself. I started asking friends or relatives if I could stay with them for awhile. I consider myself a hitchhiker, while I never actually lived on the streets, I didn't have a real home either." – DeAndrea, 18, Covenant House

The Challenge

Day-to-day tasks can be burdensome when you have difficulty accessing the supports needed to accomplish them. Youth who transition from foster care often have difficulty accessing and maintaining stable housing, reliable transportation, establishing and managing checking and savings accounts, finding healthcare, and other resources necessary for independent living. Without these basic needs, it is difficult to pursue other long-term goals like employment and education.

Siloed Services

Complicating the challenge of accessing permanency supports is the fact that many of these services are available through different and often siloed agencies. For example, a young person from foster care who is trying to access affordable housing might need to apply through the local housing authority. If he or she wishes to receive extended Medicaid, another agency is involved. Access to each support requires paperwork that is typically confusing and disconnected from other tasks youth must complete in order to receive services. Communication between these systems and service providers can make access easier for youth, and many programs are addressing this challenge by offering one-stop centers and providing wrap-around services. For example, Larkin Street Youth Services in Los Angeles, California not only offers youth both short time and transitional shelter, but they also connect youth with wrap-around services. These include healthcare, mental health and substance abuse counseling, high school and GED assistance, postsecondary education support, and career-track employment.³¹

Long Term Impacts

Interruptions in access to permanency supports like housing, healthcare, and financial services can have long-term consequences, and youth from foster care are more likely to experience these interruptions. Consider these trends:

- In 2010, researchers from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago asked participants in the “Midwest Evaluation on the Adult Function of Former Foster Youth” if they had ever experienced being homeless. They found that by the age of 26, nearly 40 percent of youth from foster care had experienced a form of homelessness or “couch-surfing”.³²
- Access to transportation is often a barrier that young people from foster care face. Many do not live in areas with public transit systems and lack the resources to own a car. Without a car or reliable access to transportation, employment and educational opportunities are nearly impossible.³³
- Saving money can also be harder for this population. According to the “Midwest Evaluation,” youth from foster care are less likely to have any checking or savings accounts (52 percent, compared to 81 percent of youth not in foster care).³⁴ Some youth from foster care have even reported being the victims of identity theft because others have taken advantage of their personal information.³⁵ This can ruin a young person’s credit and have long-term impacts on his or her ability to buy a car or home.

Easing access to permanency supports like housing, healthcare, transportation, and financial accounts presents an important opportunity for programs, agencies, policymakers, and others who work with youth in transition from foster care. In doing so, youth will be able to build a more solid foundation for themselves on the path to adulthood.

Examples of Building Permanency Supports

Across states, programs and policies are addressing the need for better and extended access to permanency supports for youth in transition from foster care. The examples provided in this section highlight opportunities where local programs and state policies have been targeted to address the permanency needs of youth, especially housing, in transition from foster care, ultimately leading to successful independence.

Short-Term Transitional Needs

Covenant House is a charity organization founded in 1972 with locations across North and Central America. More than one third of the over 56,000 youth served by Covenant House in 2013 were at some point involved with the foster care system. Covenant House developed their Continuum of Care, which consists of three core services, to address the needs of at-risk populations. First, Street Outreach allows workers to show homeless youth what services are readily available for them so that they can immediately leave the dangers of the streets behind them. Second, Crisis Care addresses the youths' immediate medical, hygienic, and nutritional needs. Youth are then evaluated to understand their education background, job readiness, and legal status so that staff can help plan for their future, including undertaking any legal action on behalf of the youth. Finally, youth are able to partake in the Rights of Passage program. This transitional living program addresses the long-term needs of at-risk youth by teaching them life-long skills, such as how to save money and how to cook a healthy meal, during Covenant House's 18-month semi-independent housing program.³⁶

"Eventually I learned about Covenant House and how it helps young people. I decided to give it a try and have now been at Covenant House for a total of 6 months. One of the great things about Covenant House is how they help you learn to grow up. Because of everything that happened to me when I was younger, I have a hard time dealing with my anger. Since I've come to Covenant House, I've been working really hard on my anger problem. Now when people say stupid things that make me want to get mad and lash out, I've learning how to ignore them and let it roll off. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for all the people who stepped in and helped me along the way – all the friends I lived with, people who helped me, or the staff at Covenant House who are teaching me how to make a new life for myself."
– DeAndrea, 18, Covenant House³⁷

Strengthening Financial Foundations

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative works across eighteen states to strengthen policies and practice that support young people in transition from foster care. Their "Opportunity Passport" initiative is focused on meeting the financial skills needs of youth in foster care between the ages of 14 and 23. The Rhode Island Initiative enrolled 164 of these young people in their financial literacy training program. One hundred and thirty-one youth opened Individual Development Accounts (IDA), which is a matched savings account through a bank. Using their growing resources and financial literacy training, youth were then empowered to invest their

savings in expenses like transportation needs, housing allowances, and education and training investments.³⁸

Housing for Youth With and Without Extended Foster Care

California's Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Program (THP+)³⁹ is a state-funded, county administered housing program that provides affordable housing and comprehensive support services to former foster and probationary youth age 18 to 24. THP+ is available to youth for up to 24 months. Because youth who chose to remain in foster care were not included within THP+, California began Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Foster Care (THP+FC)⁴⁰ in 2012. THP+FC serves youth participating in extended foster care by providing three types of housing and supportive services in semi-supervised settings. *Single-Site* housing allows youth to bond with others who come from similar situations in one apartment building/complex that is owned or leased by the provider to the participants. *Scattered-Site* locations are apartments or college dorms in multiple locations throughout the community and are often in small clusters, providing youth with more independence than single-site housing. *Host-Families* can also provide housing to youth in foster care, offering youth a permanent connection through a caring adult and the same supportive services as in other housing models.

Shattering Myths and Sharing Facts

The National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (NCHCW) provides child welfare agencies around the country with links to housing resources and knowledge about what they can do to prevent homelessness for families and youth. NCHCW does this by sharing information on many aspects including how to ensure that each youth formerly in foster care has access to safe, decent, and permanent housing. Finding housing for transitional youth remains one of the biggest challenges for youth, agencies, and states. However, by knitting funding streams together state leaders can maximize the time that youth have stable housing, preventing homelessness and achieving self-sufficiency. These funding streams include independent living, residential living, Title IV-E dollars, Chafee funds, Family Unification Program for youth, and Section 8 dollars. NCHCW travels to states, breaking myths and informing leaders about what they can do with their funding streams and identifying possible community partners to help house these youth easily and affordably.⁴¹

Summary Points

- Permanency supports like housing, healthcare, transportation and financial services are necessary elements of long-term transitional success for youth from foster care, but are often the most difficult to access.
- Programs that coordinate these supports often help provide access to physical needs in combination with personal care.
- Policies that facilitate permanency supports for youth in transition from foster care address the need for extension of services as well as coordination of systems that provide these services for this population.

IV. Postsecondary Access and Success

“I would first like to say that a program like this will never be able to receive all of the accolades that it truly deserves. The Mpowering my Success program at the University of Michigan-Flint has helped me tremendously throughout my first 2 years of higher learning. Through this program I have been able to fully adopt the university as my home and have been able to become a staple on campus. Within the first few months I was introduced to the MYOI [Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative] program. I have since matriculated to become the president of the Genesee County youth board. I owe the practice of my leadership skills and productivity to those that have given themselves fully to this program and students that it services.” – Ahliyah, 20, Mpowering My Success

The Challenge

As the postsecondary enrollment and completion rates increase for most students across the nation, youth who transition from foster care face unique challenges when applying to, enrolling in, and completing postsecondary education. Although estimates vary, the college completion rate for youth in foster care is less than 10 percent.⁴² Fortunately, some state, program, and institutional leaders are becoming more intentional in supporting foster youth on the path to postsecondary success.

Disruptions along the Pathway to Postsecondary Education

Frequent housing moves throughout K-12 education mean students in foster care are more at-risk of academic failure. Completing a high school education can be challenging for these students – by the age of 25, 20 percent of youth who age out of foster care are still without a high school diploma or GED.⁴³ Those who do complete a secondary credential go on to face barriers to postsecondary enrollment that others might not consider:

- Paperwork, like the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), can be burdensome. Some questions are confusing and ask about family financial history or an individual’s legal status (i.e. whether or not they are a “ward of the state”). Many times youth in foster care do not identify themselves as such because the terminology is off-putting.
- Financial challenges can discourage foster youth from considering a postsecondary education. Many view the cost to attend college as a greater barrier than it actually is, especially in light of financial aid that is available to them through scholarships, institutional assistance, and state tuition waivers. Still, youth in foster care often lack knowledge about these opportunities.⁴⁴
- Understanding when and how to use different financial aid resources is also a complicated issue for all students, especially youth from foster care. For example, Federal Pell Grants are only available for no more than 12 semesters. Because many foster youth are behind academically, they spend the entirety of their federal aid on developmental/remedial courses, only to find that they are still not on track to earn a credential or degree.⁴⁵ This can be avoided with more strategic planning and guidance.

Ensuring Success throughout Postsecondary Education

“What are you doing for the holidays?” This is a question that many youth from foster care in college dread, as they often have no place to stay when the dormitories close. The problem of homelessness is just one issue that these young people must face in addition to trying to succeed in school. Admission to college does not magically end the negative experiences that many youth from foster care have undergone. For many, trying to cope with past difficulties while adapting to a new environment can be stressful. Postsecondary programs that offer resources for youth from foster care to take advantage of, such as intentional advising services, can make the difference between failure and success.

Leaders at institutions of higher education are increasingly thinking about ways to support these students. This can include hiring experienced staff to provide counseling services, training financial aid and student services personnel on how to assist youth in accessing benefits, and including youth from foster care in decision-making processes about university life and services.

Planning for the Future

Connecting all young people to opportunities for career exploration and workforce training programs is important. Youth who transition out of foster care are more likely to experience unemployment, so early exposure to these opportunities is critical. There is growing research that highlights the low educational attainment and high unemployment rates of this population. Programs such as Job Corps, Year Up, Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG), National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America (OICA), YouthBuild, and The Corps Network seek to provide work and professional skills for the at-risk youth population. Still, AYPF struggled to find policies and programs that specifically connect youth from foster care to career and workforce training opportunities. There are many points along the continuum of a youth in transition from foster care when career exploration and connections to the workforce should be promoted – through guidance counselors in middle and high school; as part of a young person’s transitional plan with a case worker; and through postsecondary outreach programs that target youth from foster care.

Examples of Expanding Postsecondary Access

Wraparound Support

The Mpowering My Success program at the University of Michigan–Flint is a state-funded program that assists youth in transition from foster care by removing obstacles while helping them understand their role in personal growth, career preparation, financial management, and academic success.⁴⁶ In addition to this, Mpowering My Success provides wrap-around support services throughout a student’s academic stay through help from their Life Skills Coach, Mentors, Advisors, and Advocates around campus. Mpowering My Success also partners with different community champions including housing shelters, the Department of Human Services, the local

court system, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), religious communities, nonprofits, and philanthropic agencies who all contribute to the goals of Mpowering My Success.

A System of Encouragement

Guardian Scholars is a program that supports former foster care youth in pursuit of their postsecondary education through options in community colleges, trade schools, or universities in California, Washington, Colorado, Indiana, and Massachusetts.^{47, 48} Through a combination of full financial aid packages, housing, academic advisement, employment services, mentoring, career counseling, supplemental support services, and personal guidance, Guardian Scholars creates a rich learning environment.⁴⁹ Guardian Scholars utilizes the private sector and public agencies to ensure that youth have a wide range of supports.

Federal Support

Under the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, Education Training Vouchers (ETV) are awarded to states in order to assist youth from foster care with the cost of postsecondary education. This includes in-state two-year and four-year schools and vocational training programs. Many states also supplement the amount of ETV awarded to students with their own scholarships and grants.⁵⁰

State Student Aid for Foster Youth

Foster Care to Success, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping youth from foster care succeed in postsecondary education, estimates that of a cohort of 12,534 foster care students, 61% chose to enroll in a community college.⁵¹

Many foster students can access additional postsecondary educational financial support from their state. The amount of aid available, eligibility requirements, and length of time vary depending upon the state. For example:

- In 2011, Oregon passed the “Former Foster Youth Tuition and Fee Waiver” (HB 3471-A). This legislation allows youth who spent 12 or more months in foster care between the ages of 16-21 to waive tuition at a state university or community college. Students must first apply for other financial aid, and the waiver is applied to the portion of the tuition not already covered.⁵²
- In Tennessee, youth in foster care after the age of 14 are eligible for the Hope Foster Child Tuition Grant. This state-sponsored grant waives the cost of attendance for students attending a two-year or four-year public institution. For students who enroll in a two-year or four-year independent institution, the average cost of attendance at public institutions is applied.⁵³

Connections to the Workforce

Rhode Island's Foster Forward serves families, young adults, and children whose lives have been impacted by foster care.⁵⁴ In July, they were awarded a \$1.75 million grant through the state's workforce investment board as part of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Foster Forward will partner with local businesses and use the funding to implement "Works Wonders," a research-based initiative that gives foster youth the training, skills, and coaching needed to succeed in the workplace.⁵⁵

Summary

- The pathway to postsecondary success should begin early for all youth, but youth in foster care face multiple barriers and interruptions. These interruptions along the path of K-12 education do not have to have permanent consequences.
- Youth from foster care should be aware of the range of postsecondary opportunities. This includes two-year and four-year institutions as well as workforce training programs.
- In order to promote postsecondary success, youth from foster care need information and strategic guidance about their educational options, including application and financial aid assistance.
- Affordability is a barrier to postsecondary opportunities for youth in transition from foster care. Federal and state policies have begun to alleviate this by providing financial supplements for education.
- Once enrolled, youth from foster care benefit from partnerships that offer wrap-around supports and comprehensive resources like counseling and access to community services.
- Institutions can invest in building their professional capacity to work with youth from foster care. This includes qualified, trained counselors and knowledgeable admissions and financial aid staff.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The challenges youth face as they transition out of foster care do not have to be permanent. Youth from foster care thrive when given the opportunity to build **sustainable social capital**, to access **permanency supports**, and to succeed on the **pathway to postsecondary education and the workforce**. The question then becomes, *how can policymakers ensure these opportunities are available to all youth?*

Increase Investments

The 26,000 youth who transition out of foster care each year represent 26,000 opportunities for investment. Policymakers at the federal and state levels should consider how current resources are being utilized in order for these young people to access postsecondary opportunities, including sustainable social capital, permanency supports, and connections to education and the workforce.

- Acknowledge the unique needs of youth in transition from foster care.
- Consider increasing investment in education and training opportunities for youth in exiting foster care through tuition and fee waivers at community colleges and public and private universities.
- Increase programmatic investments in young people's financial knowledge and capacity by providing more opportunities for matched savings accounts and training on how to make wise individual investments.

Highlight the Existing Range of Post-Secondary Options

Foster youth access a range of options as they pursue postsecondary education, including two-year college programs, four-year universities, and workforce training programs. Youth in transition from foster care should be informed of this range of options.

- Include opportunities for college and career exploration as part of transitional planning for youth in foster care.
- Increase opportunities for learning about post-secondary options through knowledgeable guidance counselors and others.

Systems Coordination

When the education, housing, health, and workforce systems work collaboratively at the national, state, and local levels, youth are better served. Coordinating services reduces burdens on youth by making it easier to access services, and it creates more positive outcomes by strengthening results and accountability. Systems coordination is especially important during "transition points" for youth from foster care. With so many services overlapping at different times, it is difficult for young people to understand and manage their transition in a way that ultimately empowers them to be successful, independent adults.

- Reduce barriers that prevent education, housing, healthcare, and other agencies from sharing information and working collaboratively to serve youth in transition from foster care.
- Encourage partnerships through intermediary organizations who promote cross-systems conversations and work.

- Consider greater flexibility that allows for the blending of funding across systems and agencies.

Develop Professional Capacity

All adults who work with youth in transition from foster care must be equipped to help young people navigate the multiple systems which with they interact. Professionals who manage the systems that serve youth from foster care must possess the knowledge needed to coordinate these services across systems and agencies.

- Develop the capacity of professionals who work with foster youth to ensure they are trained, caring, and knowledgeable professionals.
- Provide caseworkers with training on youths' rights and trauma-informed therapy.
- Employ staff that understands the importance of reaching across systems such as education, housing, and mental health to help young people access services and opportunities.

Engage Youth in Decision-Making

Young people are the experts on their experiences and have ideas about improving their own opportunities. Policymakers at all levels should engage youth in conversations and decisions about creating access to postsecondary opportunities. This means not just asking youth for their input, but listening to their feedback and considering ways to implement their ideas. Some ways to do that include:

- Provide youth the opportunity to take ownership of their transitional planning alongside caseworkers and program staff.
- Include former foster youth in decision-making through local and statewide youth councils and advisory boards.

Change the Conversation

The conversation must shift from simply “transitioning out of foster care” to “transitioning *to opportunities.*” It is critical that youth in foster care know and understand the possibilities for their future. AYPF believes these options include two-year or four-year education, workforce training programs, or employment opportunities that support youth on the path to becoming civically engaged, having a career with a family-sustaining wage, and remaining lifelong learners. To communicate this goal, conversations should be broadened to include stakeholders from child welfare agencies, educational institutions and systems, housing systems, local programs, workforce representatives, court systems, and others.

Conclusion

The period of transition for youth from foster care to an independent adult life is critical. Most importantly, these young people need access to opportunities that offer guidance as they develop their social capital, permanency supports, and postsecondary pathways. The programs, policies, and ideas presented in this brief represent opportunities for continued investment from policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Ultimately, the goal for every youth transitioning out of foster care should be to become an independent and thriving adult, and the goal of every policy maker, practitioner, and researcher should be to help these youth succeed.

Appendix 1

Federal and State Requirements Around Youths' Eligibility for Extended Foster Care Services*

| State | Maximum Age of Extended Services* | State Adopted Federal Law: The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act ^o | | | | | State Law: Various Acts Passed by Individual States |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|--|--|--|
| | | Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential | Enrolled in an institution which provides post-secondary or vocational education | Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment | Employed for at least 80 hours per month | Incapable of doing any of the afore mentioned due to a medical condition | State Requirements for Extended Foster Care |
| Alabama | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Alaska | 21 | | | | | | Youth who would benefit from continued custody may consent to receive a two-year extension of commitment from the court. This can start at age 19 for some youth but it cannot extend beyond the person's 21st birthday. |
| Arizona | 21 | | | | | | Youth who leave care at age 18 or older may voluntarily return to care at any time before their 21st birthday. |
| Arkansas | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| California | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Colorado | 21 | | | | | | Youth in special circumstances. |
| Connecticut | 23 | | | | | | Youth can qualify for extended foster care under one of the three tiers: (1) youth who continue in a secondary education program are eligible to voluntarily continue in services until their graduation or receipt of their GED, (2) youth who are in an approved accredited post-secondary educational program can volunteer to continue to receive DCF services. Youth must maintain a 2.0 GPA and attend on a full time or pre-approved part-time basis at vocational, two-, or four-year college until the age of 21. Youth who earn at least 24 credits by the end of the school year following their 21st birthday can continue to receive services until the end of the school year following their 23rd birthday, and (3) youth who have already graduated from high school or received their GED can voluntarily continue in services so that they can work or be in a job training program for one year following their graduation. |
| Delaware | 21 | | | | | | Youth attending school and wish to remain in placement. |

Federal and State Requirements Around Youths' Eligibility for Extended Foster Care Services*

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|----------------------|---|---|--|---|--|--|--|
| | | Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential | Enrolled in an institution which provides post-secondary or vocational education | Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment | Employed for at least 80 hours per month | Incapable of doing any of the afore mentioned due to a medical condition | State Requirements for Extended Foster Care |
| District of Columbia | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Jurisdiction for youth in foster care ends at age 21 and the court must approve requests to terminate care before age 21. |
| Florida | 21 | | | | | | Youth has not achieved permanency and is therefore eligible to remain in licensed care if he or she meets certain criteria. |
| Georgia | 21.5 | | | | | | Youth may remain until age 21.5 if the additional 6 months will allow time to complete an educational program. Youth must have an educational plan in place. |
| Hawaii | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Idaho | 21 | | | | | | Youth still in school and working on an independent living plan that includes continuing education, employment, and self-sufficiency skills. |
| Illinois | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Indiana | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Iowa | 20 | | | | | | Youth in high school or getting a GED. |
| Kansas | 21 | | | | | | Youth may chose to stay in care up until 21 years of age. |
| Kentucky | 21 | | | | | | Youth may request to extend commitment or reinstate commitment and their request must be approved by the court. |
| Louisiana | 21 | | | | | | Youth must be in school full-time or in school part-time and working part-time when signing a voluntary contract between the ages of 18 and 21. There may be exceptions. |
| Maine | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Maryland | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Massachusetts | 22 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Michigan | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Minnesota | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Mississippi | 21 | | | | | | Youth in special circumstances. |
| Missouri | 21 | | | | | | Youth must be in school, court ordered to remain in care, or it is in the youth's best interest to remain in care. |

Federal and State Requirements Around Youths' Eligibility for Extended Foster Care Services*

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|----------------|---|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| | | Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential | Enrolled in an institution which provides post-secondary or vocational education | Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment | Employed for at least 80 hours per month | Incapable of doing any of the aforementioned due to a medical condition | State Requirements for Extended Foster Care |
| Montana | 21 | | | | | | Youth in high school and (1) at grade level, but will not graduate from high school until after their 18th birthday, (2) at grade level but is having academic difficulties or is missing credits and will not graduate before their 18th birthday, or (3) below grade level and is more likely to graduate from high school if they remain in the foster care setting. |
| Nebraska | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Nevada | 21 | | | | | | Youth who age out of care in Nevada may enroll into Nevada's Court Jurisdiction Program, which allows youth to continue to access services. Youth must agree to work on a plan to help them transition successfully into adulthood and they are required to work or go to school while in the program. Youth must enroll into the Court Jurisdiction Program at age 18 and can remain in the program up until the age of 21. |
| New Hampshire | 20 | | | | | | Youth who have not graduated from high school or completed their GED and is under the age of 21. |
| New Jersey | 21 | | | | | | Youth has not yet graduated from high school, is in need of special treatment that cannot be provided through another source, or if he or she is a teen parent who needs to be under supervision. |
| New Mexico | 19 | | | | | | Youth can continue to receive services beyond age 18 but they are not in foster care. The court may continue to monitor their progress to age 19; however, this is a voluntary decision made by the youth. |
| New York | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| North Carolina | 21 | | | | | | Youth in school/vocational training full time. |
| North Dakota | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Ohio | 19 [^] | | | | | | Youth is in school or has special needs. |
| Oklahoma | 21 | | | | | | Youth must be in the process of completing the requirements for a high school education or GED. |

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|----------------|---|---|--|---|--|--|--|
| | | Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential | Enrolled in an institution which provides post-secondary or vocational education | Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment | Employed for at least 80 hours per month | Incapable of doing any of the afore mentioned due to a medical condition | State Requirements for Extended Foster Care |
| Oregon | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Pennsylvania | 21 | | | | | | Youth who request from the court to retain jurisdiction to complete a course of treatment. |
| Rhode Island | 21 | | | | | | Youth who are involved with the Department due to juvenile delinquency may continue involvement with the Department until they turn 19. Youth with serious emotional disturbances, autism, or functional developmental disabilities and who are not yet eligible for the adult system of care are entitled to services up to age 21. |
| South Carolina | 21 | | | | | | Youth in school or vocational training, or youth who suffer from a disabling condition that places youth at risk and remaining in care is in the youth's best interest. |
| South Dakota | 21 | | | | | | Youth has not completed high school. |
| Tennessee | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Texas | 22 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Utah | 21 | | | | | | Youth who receive a court order or are significant need of continued services. |
| Vermont | 19 | | | | | | Youth in an education program. |
| Virginia | 21 | | | | | | Youth must be enrolled in an educational or vocational program and agree to participate in the Independent Living Program. |
| Washington | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| West Virginia | 21 | ✓ | ✓ | | | | Boarding care may be continued for foster children from age 18 through age 20 if (1) the young adult requests continued financial supports after receiving a clear explanation of his/her right to independence and responsibility for self-support at age eighteen, and (2) the young adult will continue his/her college, vocational, or training education and plans to continue his/her current enrollment, or plans to enroll in a different school or training program within the next three months. |

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|-----------|---|---|--|---|--|--|--|
| | | Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential | Enrolled in an institution which provides post-secondary or vocational education | Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment | Employed for at least 80 hours per month | Incapable of doing any of the afore mentioned due to a medical condition | State Requirements for Extended Foster Care |
| Wisconsin | 21 | | | | | | Youth enrolled in high school or a high school completion program can extend care up to age 19. Youth who have an individualized education program may receive extended out-of-home care up to age 21. |
| Wyoming | 21 | | | | | | Youth can remain in care until age 21 only for educational reasons. A judge has to order the extended stay and the case has to be reviewed by the judge every six months. |

Key

*Information last updated on December 3, 2014.

^oState has an approved plan to extend Title IV-E (Federal foster care) beyond age 18 and up to age 21 for at least one of the five conditions that states can adopt from 42 U.S.C. § 675(8)(B)(iii).

^xThis does not include Medicaid coverage, which has been extended to all foster care youth who were receiving Medicaid on the date they left care. It is mandatory for all states to provide Medicaid coverage for their foster care youth up to age 26, no matter the state's decision around Medicaid expansion or the income of the youth.

[^]Legislation to rise the age to 21 and update requirements is currently pending.

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