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## YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE: SUPPORTING THEIR TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD

Young people today face a host of life challenges. They confront high unemployment rates, limited jobs, expensive housing, and rising debts. These struggles often force many young people back home with their families. In fact, many young adults continue to depend on family support well into their 20s and 30s (Furstenberg, Jr., Kennedy, Mcloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, Jr., 2004). While many youth across the country are fortunate enough to rely on financial support from family members, young people aging out of foster care do not have this option. They have to make it on their own.

Approximately 29,500 youth, ages 18 and older, transition out of foster care with limited independent living skills and without a permanent family—all critical factors to a successful transition into adulthood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Unlike their peers, they have to make adult life decisions from obtaining stable employment to finding affordable housing with limited, if any, supports. Unfortunately, research shows that youth who have exited foster care without a family to turn to are more likely to experience unhealthy outcomes including, homelessness, poverty, incarceration and/or poor health (National Foster Care Coalition, 2009). While child welfare workers across the country currently work within local systems to help young people transition out of state custody, the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 has created opportunities for states to further support the permanency and well-being of older youth in foster care through new supports and services.

### Critical Issues Facing Youth Aging Out of Care

Young people transitioning out of foster care are significantly affected by the instability that comes with long periods of out of home placement, multiple school transfers, and the challenge of preserving relationships with their biological families. They are also at increased risk of adversity. Older foster youth face many hardships such as, inadequate educational preparation, unstable finances, and limited access to viable employment and housing opportunities. Sadly, thousands of youth transition out of foster care with inadequate life skills and scarce resources and struggle to confront and overcome these challenges.

Access to education and employment opportunities is critical to meeting life's basic needs. However, young people with foster care experience demonstrate poorer academic outcomes compared to their peers (National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, 2010). It is not unusual for children and youth to change schools multiple times while in foster care. Consequently, these multiple changes can impact students' educational progress. In fact, students can lose four to six months of academic programs with every school change (National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, 2010). Research shows that only three percent of young people aging out of foster care attend and graduate from a college or university (National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, 2010). Poor academic performance can lead to negative long-term outcomes including unemployment or low wages, making it difficult for young people to make ends meet. Despite the fact that many youth may have part-time work experience, statistics show a low employment rate for

youth in foster care compared to youth in the general population (National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, 2010). Unfortunately, unstable employment can also impact young people's access to health insurance. The majority of former foster youth lack health insurance (Casey Family Programs, 2008).

Unlike their peers, young people exiting foster care are also forced to prematurely tackle the harsh reality of the gap between their earnings and the cost of housing—sometimes leading to episodes of housing instability and homelessness (White & Rog, 2004). In fact, youth leaving foster care are becoming homeless at alarming rates – between 12 and 36 percent of former foster youth experience homelessness (White & Rog, 2004). Research also indicates that 32 percent of young people leaving care reported changing living situations five or more times within two to four years (Casey Family Programs, 2008). Unfortunately, older foster youth are responsible for paying security deposits, signing leases, furnishing their homes, and making monthly rental payments – all with limited, if any supports. Safe, stable and affordable housing is critical to a young adult's ability to maintain steady employment, pursue higher education, access health care benefits, maintain a support network and in some instances, care for their children (Torricco & Bhat, 2009).

### The Passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections) was signed into law on October 7, 2008. The most significant child welfare reform legislation in more than a decade, the Fostering Connections law has made significant improvements aimed at improving outcomes for children and youth who have spent time in foster care and those at risk of child welfare involvement. A number of the Fostering Connections' provisions are designed to promote the well-being of older youth in foster care. These provisions will support foster youth by:

- **Extending eligibility for Title IV-E payments to age 21.** Effective October 1, 2010, states will be allowed to extend federally funded foster care, adoption and guardian assistance to age 21 for Title IV-E eligible youth who meet specific education, training or employment requirements.
- **Mandating the development of a transition plan.** States will be mandated to develop a transition plan for young people aging out of foster care no later than 90 days prior to their 18th birthday, or older if the state chooses to extend care beyond 18. These transition plans should address topics including housing, health insurance, education, employment, workforce supports and local

opportunities for mentors and supportive services. Youth should also be included in the development of their transition plan.

- **Extending Independent Living Services/Program (ILP).** The law extends eligibility for the Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program (ILP) services to young people who exit foster care through kinship care or adoption after age 16. While they vary across states, independent living program services can include life skills preparation classes and services aimed at preparing young people to successfully transition into adulthood.
- **Extending eligibility for educational resources.** The law extends eligibility for Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) through the state's Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to youth who leave foster care to kinship guardianship at age 16 or older. Youth adopted after 16 were already eligible. Vouchers can be used for up to \$5,000 per year per eligible youth for secondary education and training.

### What Can Social Workers Do?

- **Work with youth in foster care to develop a transition plan early.** Social workers can work in partnership with the young person to develop a solid transition plan prior to discharge. This plan should fit the youth's individual needs, circumstances and goals. It should address housing, health insurance, education, employment, workforce supports and support networks including mentors. Plans can also address other issues such as immigration status when applicable. Social workers can include other supportive adults involved with the youth including foster parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), attorneys or relatives in the development of the young person's transition plan. Additionally, social workers can ensure that young people have all of their personal documents before leaving care. This includes an original copy of their social security card, a copy of their birth certificate, citizen documents, a copy of their credit report and any other relevant documents. It is important that youth have access to these documents because they can often be difficult for youth to obtain once they leave care.
- **Use a cross-system approach to service planning and delivery.** Social workers can partner across systems to meet the broad range of needs of youth as they become older. Partners can include housing authorities, school districts, public health agencies or adult services. For example, in a case where a foster youth with disabilities ages out of the child welfare system, coordination of transition planning among key agencies and systems is critical.

- **Implement prevention and intervention strategies grounded in youth development.** Social workers can recognize the unique strengths, abilities, and needs of young people and empower them to set goals and promote their life skills in decision making. Social workers can also help to keep youth on track with their goals and support them in celebrating their success.
- **Provide culturally appropriate services.** Social workers can provide services that respect the individual differences of young people, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.
- **Collaborate with others to address service needs.** Social workers can ensure that youth access appropriate services including but not limited to housing, health, employment, education, and financial literacy services through other service providers. For instance, a young person attending college could avoid short periods of homelessness during school holidays and breaks if the social worker coordinates temporary housing solutions during the student's school breaks. In addition, social workers can reach out to landlords, religious organizations, schools or universities and/or other volunteers to help older youth. For example, housing options for youth could potentially be expanded through established relationships with housing authorities and landlords. They are often more willing to work with youth that are affiliated with an agency or organization.
- **Provide basic, concrete assistance.** Social workers can access resources for financial assistance (e.g., emergency cash for a security deposit, a rental subsidy, or overdue utility bills, etc.) to help youth obtain or remain in housing or out of a financial crisis. For example, new funds through Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) can be used to prevent homelessness and rapidly rehouse youth at risk of homelessness (these funds cannot be used as part of the transition plan). Social workers can also reach out to local human service or community based organizations to see what other funding sources are available to assist at-risk older youth.
- **Use a variety of funding streams to serve youth.** Social workers and agency and program leaders can access a variety of funding streams to address the needs of young people. For example, some communities can use the Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers to house young people and funds from the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to provide ongoing case management services for youth that have aged out of foster care. Depending on the specific circumstances, other communities can tap into state, local and federal funding streams to serve older youth.
- **Make the case to support older youth in care.** Social workers and agency or program leaders should involve themselves in their community's funding allocation process whenever possible. Social workers can be very effective in advocating for older youth. Engaging older youth to strategically tell their stories can also be a very powerful approach in advocating for funding. Partnerships with other service providers are also an effective approach to increase a program or agency's funding pool.

### Conclusion

Like many other young people across the country, youth exiting foster care have high hopes and aspirations. They too want to pursue higher education, accept their first jobs, move into their own apartments and have meaningful relationships in their lives. Sadly, their realities are unlike their peers. Young people leaving foster care have many more obstacles to overcome before achieving their goals. However, with support and opportunities they too, can realize their strengths and abilities to reach their goals.

In order for young people to successfully transition into adulthood, they need to be adequately prepared to exit the system. It is important that youth in foster care be meaningfully involved in a solid transition planning process that focuses on the development of independent living skills and addresses topics including, safe, stable and affordable housing, access to health insurance, education and employment opportunities in addition to creating healthy, permanent connections. The passage and implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 can be instrumental in promoting the well-being of older youth in care and preparing them to succeed as young adults on their own.

### Resources

*Social workers are key players in ensuring that older youth have access to services. Below is a list of federal policy and programs that can fund services to support the needs of youth aging out of care.*

#### Chafee Foster Care Independence Programs

The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999) offers states essential funding to assist youth up to age 21 in their transition into adulthood. The Chafee program funds services including education, training, employment and financial support. States may also spend up to 30 percent of funds on room and board services of older youth between ages of 18 and 21.

#### College Cost Reduction Act

Effective July 2009, the College Cost Reduction Act allows certain youth who have been in foster care to claim an independent status when applying for financial federal aid. Typically, students who claim independent status are able to access greater federal education assistance because they are not required to include their parent's income and asset information.

### Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act

In October 2008, Congress passed this substantial child welfare reform law extending foster care services up to age 21. This law also promotes permanent families through relative guardianship and adoption, improves educational stability and health planning and training opportunities.

### Family Unification Program (FUP)

The Family Unification Program, signed into law in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush, works through local level partnerships between public housing authorities and child welfare agencies. FUP provides families with Section 8 housing subsidies and the supportive services (which are funded largely out of child welfare) necessary to reunite with their children or avoid foster care placement altogether. In October 2000, Congress added youth as an eligible population for FUP. FUP provides youth aging out of care with the vital housing resources they need to avoid homelessness and make successful transitions to adulthood.

### Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP)

On February 17, 2009, President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which included a \$1.5 billion for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP). HPRP aims to prevent homelessness and rapidly rehouse individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

### Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program

Authorized through the Social Security Act, this program aims to prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families, improve the quality of care and services to children and their families, and ensure permanency for children through reunification, adoption or another permanent living arrangement. Programs could include family support, family preservation, time-limited family reunification, and adoption promotion and support services.

### Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)

Special Immigrant Juvenile Status provides lawful permanent residency to children and youth who are under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court and who have not been able to reunify with their families as a result of abuse, neglect or abandonment.

### Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Programs

The Workforce Investment Act authorized job training programs to unemployed and underemployed individuals for the Department of Labor (DOL). Two of these programs – Youth Activities and Job Corps – provide job training and supportive services to foster youth. The WIA Youth Activities program focuses on preventative strategies to prevent dropouts and develop occupational skills, in addition to providing training and supportive services (e.g., child care). Job Corps is an educational and training vocational training program that provides students with opportunities to learn a trade, complete their GED, and secure employment.

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