

THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

*How States Can Support*  
**OLDER YOUTH**  
*in FOSTER CARE*



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# Executive Summary





The number of youth aging out\* of foster care has increased every year since 2001. In the past five years alone, more than 100,000 youth left the foster care system because of age limits or because they “aged out.”<sup>1</sup> This population, although small in number, has a high economic cost to state governments and society as a whole. Yet, because there are relatively few of these young people, states that invest in them can make a large positive impact without incurring great cost.

Youth who age out of the foster care system are more likely than their non-foster care peers to be involved with the criminal justice system, have low educational attainment, become pregnant, experience homelessness, and lack health insurance.<sup>2</sup> One study showed, for example, that a mere 6 percent of foster youth had completed a two- or four-year postsecondary degree by age 23 or 24, compared with 29 percent of their peers.<sup>3</sup> A startling 77 percent of female foster youth became pregnant by age 23 or 24, compared with just 40 percent of their peers in the general population.<sup>4</sup> In general, individuals who leave foster care at age 18 are more apt to grow into adults who will require long-term government support and who experience lifelong difficulties.

Youth development experts and child welfare researchers point to evidence showing that a state’s best chance to adequately prepare foster youth for adulthood is to undertake complementary strategies in education, employment, health care, and other areas. Many states, including **Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, and Massachusetts**, have implemented promising approaches in these areas. They have shown that both foster youth and states can benefit from a comprehensive approach that helps these young people successfully transition to adulthood.

In fact, some research shows that concerted (and relatively inexpensive) investments in foster youth’s long-term success could potentially save the nation \$5.7 billion for each annual cohort of youth transitioning out of foster care by reducing the demand for public spending that correlates with poor education and low employment, such as welfare assistance and criminal justice expenditures.<sup>5</sup> Many of the strategies described in this report have little or no cost; involve getting existing systems, such as education and health, to work more collaboratively; and leverage currently available federal and private funding in new or different ways.

This report highlights effective state strategies and promising approaches aimed at improving outcomes for foster youth in the following five areas:

- **Education – Promote Educational Attainment.** Low educational attainment rates among foster youth limit their employment prospects, earning power, and ability to remain financially stable over their lifetimes. States can structure policies and programs to encourage goal setting, minimize disruptions in education, and inform foster youth about educational opportunities that will improve their college and career outcomes.
- **Employment – Connect Youth with Employment and Career Training.** Foster youth tend to be unemployed or underemployed compared with their counterparts in the general population. State child welfare agencies are encouraged to form partnerships with the existing public workforce system and private employers to better connect former foster care youth with training and employment opportunities.

Effective state strategies can improve outcomes for foster youth in five areas: education, employment, housing, health care, and relationships.

\*Exactly when youth age out of the foster care system varies by state from age 18 to age 23. Throughout this paper, the phrases “age out” and “youth in transition” are used to refer to youth who are about to or have aged out of the foster care system according to the legal age in their state.

**TABLE 1: Outcomes for Foster Youth Compared With Youth in General**

Outcome Measures	Former Foster Youth at Age 23 and 24	Peers in General Population at Age 23 and 24	Typical Causes Leading to Poor Outcomes for Foster Youth	State Strategies to Improve Outcomes for Youth in Transition
Lack of High School Diploma or GED by Age 23 or 24	25%	7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely to change schools several times</li> <li>• Delayed enrollment due to inaccurate and lost school records</li> <li>• More likely to need special education services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize school changes by keeping foster youth in the same school during placement changes</li> <li>• Work with foster youth and school administrators to track academic records</li> <li>• Ensure coordination and monitoring of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) among case workers for youth with disabilities</li> </ul>
Completion of Two- or Four-Year Degree by Age 23 or 24	6%	19%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of awareness of college or job training opportunities</li> <li>• No housing options during holiday and summer breaks</li> <li>• No emotional or financial support provided by a parent or caring adult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educate foster youth while in middle school and high school about postsecondary education or job training options</li> <li>• Provide assistance with college application process</li> <li>• Waive tuition for foster youth at state higher educational institutions and offer scholarships that cover all costs (e.g., books, room and board, and clothing)</li> </ul>
Median Yearly Earnings From Employment	\$8,000	\$18,300	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited opportunities to learn about employment or careers</li> <li>• Lack of adult role models to teach appropriate professional behavior</li> <li>• Poor education outcomes</li> <li>• Lack of caring and educated adults to help youth apply for available opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give youth transitioning out of foster care opportunities to learn about career options and develop the habits, attitudes, and skills they need to find and retain employment</li> <li>• Connect youth to employment opportunities through partnerships with the public workforce system and employers</li> <li>• Structure opportunities for youth to learn about money management and asset development</li> </ul>
Receiving Aid from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	67%	7% female/ 2% male		
Homeless at Least Once	24%	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often released from foster care without a place to live</li> <li>• No responsible adults to stay with during the transition</li> <li>• Lack of financial resources to afford housing</li> <li>• Lack of opportunities to open a bank account and establish rental or credit history</li> <li>• No adults to use as references or co-signers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create linkages between state and local housing authorities and community-based organizations to leverage resources such as rental subsidies</li> <li>• Support youth in housing placements</li> </ul>
Medical Insurance Coverage	57%	78%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to navigate systems to transition into adult insurance options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop mechanisms to help youth track their medical history and manage their own health care</li> <li>• Extend medical care beyond age 18</li> </ul>
Pregnant	77%	40%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trouble seeking love or connection with others</li> </ul>	
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	Six times the general population and double the rate of veterans returning from war	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High risk of health and mental health problems</li> <li>• Lack of healthy environment</li> <li>• Trauma of removal from family or foster homes</li> <li>• Lack of caring adults to bond with and receive emotional support from</li> </ul>	
Males Arrested by Age 23 or 24	81%	17%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited or no personal relationships with adults</li> <li>• Disconnected from family and social networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect youth to grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other caring adults</li> <li>• Establish legal guardianships or some other permanent arrangements to connect caring adults to youth's lives</li> <li>• Help youth develop relationships with caring adults such as teachers, clergy, or mentors who share their interests</li> <li>• When appropriate, explore the viability of reunification with biological parents</li> </ul>

Source: Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, JoAnn S. Lee, and Melissa Raap, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24* (Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010), 4. Available at [http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest\\_Study\\_Age\\_23\\_24.pdf](http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_Age_23_24.pdf).



- **Housing – Enhance Access to Safe and Stable Housing.** Many former foster youth experience at least one episode of homelessness in their lives, which increases their susceptibility to substance abuse, mental illness, and physical abuse. Links between state and local housing authorities and community-based organizations can help states leverage resources to ensure youth are able to find affordable, safe, and stable housing when they leave the foster care system.
- **Health Care – Help Youth Access and Manage Health Care.** Foster youth are more likely than their peers in the general population to experience physical and mental health problems but are less likely to have health insurance. States can improve access to health care for foster youth by extending Medicaid eligibility, improving access to other medical services, and developing mechanisms to help these young people track their medical histories.
- **Relationships – Help Youth Build Stable and Lifelong Relationships.** Youth who age out of the foster care system, without a permanent connection to a responsible adult or adults, are at a higher risk of becoming involved in harmful behaviors such as crime and substance abuse. Case workers, judges, and other decision-makers can work with young people to help them develop permanency plans and options.

Comparative outcomes for foster youth and youth in the general population, possible reasons for the differing outcomes, and state strategies to improve prospects for youth in the transition to adulthood are touched on briefly (see Table 1 on page 4). In the chapters of the report that follow, each of the state strategies is described in more detail. Throughout the report, there are additional examples of successful state and local efforts to improve the lives of foster youth.

# Chapter 1





## Current Conditions and State Challenges

This year, approximately 29,000 youth will age out of the foster care system by their 21st birthday.<sup>1,6</sup> Some will successfully make their way in the world—completing their education, finding employment, and becoming healthy and self-sufficient adults. But many will not be so fortunate. In particular, those without family connections and a network of supports and services will likely struggle. (The typical youth in the general population does not reach self-sufficiency until the age of 26 and receives an average of \$44,500 in parental support after age 18.<sup>7</sup>)

Youth who age out of foster care are often ill-prepared to thrive independently. A successful transition to adulthood is built on stable relationships with caring adults, access to health care, educational attainment, employment, and safe and stable housing.<sup>8</sup> Children in foster care suffer trauma when they are removed from their biological home, family, and community. Their loss is often compounded by multiple additional moves that take place while the child is in the foster care system. In addition, older youth—commonly placed in group homes—are even more disconnected from their families and communities and have limited access to meaningful education or employment opportunities. During placement moves, not only are school and health records often misplaced and services delayed but the ability to establish meaningful connections with others is also shattered.

Evidence suggests that many youth who transition out of the foster care system do not have access to the essential building blocks that lead to success in life and, as a result, have poor and costly outcomes. For example, Chapin Hall's Midwest study<sup>9</sup> compared a sample of 602 youth at age 23 or 24 who were or had been in foster care prior to their 16th birthday to a nationally representative sample of 23- or 24-year-olds who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The Midwest study found the following differences in the two groups of young people:

- Nearly 25 percent of foster youth had not obtained a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) diploma by age 23 or 24 compared with just 7 percent of youth in the comparison group who failed to get a high school diploma or GED.
- Only 6 percent of foster youth had completed a two- or four-year degree by age 23 or 24 compared with 29 percent of their peers.
- Median yearly earnings from employment among foster youth were \$8,000 compared with \$18,300 among the youth in the comparison group.
- Fifty-seven percent of foster youth had medical insurance compared with 78 percent of the general population.

The number of youth who age out of foster care continues to rise. Because this population is relatively small, experts believe focused efforts by policymakers not only make a significant difference in the lives of these youth – but can also result in budget savings for states.



Failure to take action to improve outcomes for foster youth will cost states \$5.7 billion for each cohort of youth that leave foster care in a given year, including:

- \$4.8 billion in criminal justice–related costs;
- \$116 million in costs stemming from unplanned parenthood; and
- \$749 million in loss of earnings due to foster youth’s lower rates of educational attainment compared with the rest of the population.

Source: Cutler Consulting, *Cost Avoidance: Bolstering the Economic Case for Investing in Youth Aging Out of Foster Care* (St. Louis, MO: Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2009), 8.

- Twenty-four percent of foster youth who had aged out of the foster care system had been homeless at least once.
- Eighty-one percent of male foster youth had been arrested by age 23 or 24 compared with 17 percent of the comparison group.
- Seventy-seven percent of female foster youth had been pregnant compared with 40 percent of the female youth in the general population.
- Two-thirds of female and 27 percent of male foster youth were receiving SNAP (food stamps) compared with 7 percent of females and 2 percent of males in the comparison group.

The lives of foster youth are far from what is considered “normal” for U.S. teenagers. Unlike their peers in the general population, foster youth often lack familial support. Approximately half of youth ages 18 to 24 in the United States live at home, and nearly two-thirds of young adults in their twenties receive economic support from their parents.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, foster youth in most states lose access to many—in some cases all—of the supports provided by the foster care system when they are released from state custody at age 18.<sup>11</sup>

The poor outcomes of foster youth are costly to states. An analysis by Cutler Consulting estimated that the cost of each annual cohort of youth aging out of the foster care system is approximately \$5.7 billion.<sup>12</sup> These costs come in the form of lost earnings (and thus lost revenues), criminal justice system expenditures, and unplanned pregnancy expenses such as government cash assistance and health programs. On an individual level, each foster youth who drops out of high school costs the public sector \$209,100 over a lifetime due to lost wages and greater need for public support services.<sup>13</sup>

Although relatively small, the number of youth who age out of foster care continues to rise. From 2005 to 2009, there was a 21 percent increase in the number of youth aging out of the foster care system without achieving a connection to a permanent legal family.<sup>14</sup> Because this population is relatively small, experts believe that focused efforts on the part of policymakers can not only make a significant difference in the lives of these youth but can also result in substantial budget savings for states.

How can states help youth who are aging out of foster care? Although the cost of implementing improved policies and programs for foster youth varies, states can take advantage of available federal funds and local private foundations and programs to support these youth. Several federal programs enable states to provide an array of supports to youth transitioning out of foster care (see box on next page).

*On average, parents spend a total of \$44,500 on their children after they reach age 18. However, youth in foster care lose access to almost all supports when they leave the system.*

## FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN TRANSITION

Approximately 65 federal programs provide funding to states to support foster youth in transition.<sup>15</sup> Two of the most comprehensive laws that deal with this population are the Foster Care Independence Act and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.

### Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999

The FCIA is critical to the provision of services for foster youth because it provides states with a dedicated funding stream for transitional services. The Act's main component—the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independent Living program (the Chafee program)—receives about \$140 million a year in federal appropriations to support a variety of services for youth in transition.

The Chafee program offers payments to states and tribes to help youth successfully move into adulthood, including services for youth up to age 21 who have already aged out of the foster care system. States can use Chafee program funds for education, training, employment, and financial support services. States may spend up to 30 percent of their Chafee program dollars on room and board for former foster youth.

The Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV) program—another Chafee program authorized at \$60 million per year—provides eligible foster care youth with up to \$5,000 annually for postsecondary education and training. States and tribes receive formula funds and, in turn, make the vouchers available to youth to pay for education and training.

### Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections) of 2008

The Fostering Connections child welfare reform law enacted the following provisions designed to help states serve youth in transition:

- As of October 2010, provides a federal match under Title IV-E—the federal program that reimburses states for foster and out-of-home care—for “maintenance payments” to foster care youth up to 21 years old, an expansion from the prior age of 18. Many states already pay for services for this older set of youth to some extent, but federal reimbursement could help states retain youth in care.
- As of October 2008, provides for the first time a federal match to states for payments to legal kinship guardians.
- As of October 2010, delinks the adoption assistance eligibility from the 1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children income requirements. This provision in effect allows states to claim reimbursement for more children, which should open up substantial additional funding for states.
- Requires child welfare agencies to coordinate with local education agencies to keep children in their school of origin unless it is not in their best interest. The law also provides an increase in the amount of federal reimbursement to transport children in foster care to their school of origin.
- Requires development of a transition plan for youth in foster care at least 90 days prior to a youth exiting from care. The personal transition plan must be developed with input from the youth and detail the options the youth chooses for housing, health insurance, education, mentoring, continuing support services, workforce supports, and employment supports.<sup>16</sup>

### Other Federal Programs

Although foster youth are not the specific target population of the following federal labor, health and human services, and education programs, they are eligible for services funded by the grants.

- **Workforce Investment Act (WIA).** WIA-funded One-Stop Career Centers serve as clearinghouses of resources for job seekers and businesses. Under Title I of WIA, the federal government allocates formula funding to local workforce investment boards, which may partner with child welfare agencies to serve foster and other at-risk youth.<sup>17</sup>
- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).** The TANF block grant supports states' welfare programs but also provides flexible funding that states can tap to help youth in transition. In particular, the TANF goal of preventing and reducing incidents of out-of-wedlock pregnancies allows states to use TANF funds on programs and activities that promote responsible behavior and school completion, teach decision-making or employment skills, and enhance motivation and self-esteem. These programs could be specifically targeted to foster youth or foster youth could be among those allowed to participate.
- **Medicaid.** Children and youth in foster care who are eligible under Title IV-E are automatically eligible for Medicaid coverage until they exit the system. Many states have extended this categorical Medicaid coverage for foster youth up to age 21 based on the Chafee option. Even in states that have not adopted the Chafee option, some youth may be eligible for Medicaid after exiting foster care if they are low income and pregnant, parenting, or living with a disability.

# Chapter 2





## Five State Strategies to Help Youth in Transition

**N**o single state strategy will improve all of the outcomes for all youth transitioning out of foster care. But youth development experts and child welfare researchers point to evidence that shows states can make great strides by better preparing foster youth for adulthood, mostly through education, employment, housing, health care, and relationship-building initiatives. Foster youth who receive services to improve their outcomes in these areas—for the duration of their time in the system or even longer—will rely less on government aid, earn higher wages, and send more revenue back to states throughout their lifetimes.

States will be more effective if they employ a cross-system approach to assisting foster youth. Many states already provide some of the programs covered in this report or have the infrastructure to offer these services. For states to provide complementary supports they must build on their existing resources and form new partnerships among state agencies. By enhancing the connections between all youth-serving agencies—such as child welfare, education, health, mental health, juvenile justice, and workforce development—states can dramatically streamline services, reduce costs, and improve program effectiveness overall.

The NGA Center has identified a collection of important state strategies, drawn from research and experience with state policymakers, that mitigate the challenges youth in transition face. States are encouraged to develop policies in the five areas summarized below, which are described in more detail later in this chapter.

- **Promote Educational Attainment and High School Completion.** Low educational attainment rates among foster youth limit their employment prospects, earning power, and ability to remain financially stable over their lifetimes. Only about 50 percent of foster youth have completed high school by age 18 compared with 70 percent of youth in the general population. A study conducted by Casey Family Programs found that only 2 percent of youth from foster care received a bachelor's degree compared with 24 percent of adults in the general population.<sup>18</sup> Statistics show that most individuals who do not graduate from high school or who graduate but fail to move on to postsecondary education or training will experience depressed earnings, contribute less to state revenue, and be more reliant on public supports.
- **Connect Youth with Employment and Career Training.** Foster youth tend to be unemployed or underemployed compared to the general population. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni study<sup>19</sup> (the Midwest study) reveals that 80 percent of former foster youth surveyed during 2000–2002 were employed, which is considerably lower than the 95 percent national employment rate for 20- to 34-year-old adults overall. State child welfare agencies can form partnerships with the existing public workforce system and with private employers to better connect former foster care youth with training and employment opportunities.

States will be more effective if they employ a cross-system approach to assisting foster youth. By enhancing the connections between all youth-serving agencies—such as child welfare, education, health, mental health, juvenile justice, and workforce development—states can dramatically streamline services, reduce costs, and improve program effectiveness.

- **Enhance Access to Safe and Stable Housing.** Just 49 percent of former foster youth in the Midwest study lived in their own dwelling by age 23 or 24.<sup>20</sup> Creating linkages between state and local housing authorities and community-based organizations is one way that states can leverage resources to ensure that emancipated youth find affordable, safe, and stable housing.
- **Help Youth Access and Manage Health Care.** Foster youth are more likely than their peers in the general population to experience physical and mental health issues but are less likely to have health insurance. A total of 70 percent of foster youth in the Midwest study who said they had health insurance were on Medicaid.<sup>21</sup> States can improve access to health care for foster youth by extending Medicaid eligibility, improving access to other medical services, and developing mechanisms to help youth track their medical histories.
- **Help Youth Build Stable and Lifelong Relationships.** Permanent connections with caring adults provide foster youth with emotional support and guidance to help them make important decisions and overcome obstacles. Unfortunately, most youth who transition out of care lack a permanent connection. According to a study published this year in the journal *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*,<sup>22</sup> children in foster care who had mentors and participated in skills groups focused on problem solving, prevention, and healthy relationships had fewer mental health symptoms, were less likely to need ongoing therapy, and were less apt to report symptoms of disassociation. In the absence of a consistent relationship with a caring adult—who can guide youth toward positive decisions—many young people will engage in risky behaviors that can be costly to themselves and to states. Case workers, judges, and other decision-makers can work with youth to help them develop permanency plans and to explore the viability of various permanency options.

## Promote Educational Attainment

Lack of educational attainment is detrimental to the long-term economic well-being of foster youth, which will in turn negatively impact state economies. Youth in foster care have poor education outcomes in part because they frequently change schools—on average seven times every year—and are often behind their peers in grade-level achievement. Approximately 50 percent of foster youth complete high school by age 18 compared with the general population’s 70 percent high school completion rate.<sup>23</sup> Others estimate that just 7 percent to 13 percent of youth from foster care enroll in higher education.<sup>24</sup> On average, individuals with only a high school diploma earn \$30,470 a year, while those with a bachelor’s degree earn \$50,784 a year. One study found that a 5 percent increase in the high school graduation and college matriculation rates among foster care males could lead to combined savings and revenues of almost \$8 billion nationally each year in reduced crime-related costs alone.<sup>25</sup>

States can structure policies and programs that encourage goal setting, involve youth in educational planning, minimize school-year disruptions, and inform youth about educational opportunities—all of which can improve foster youth’s success in education



and the job market. Efforts to support education attainment must occur at all grade levels—elementary, middle, and high school—and continue through college and early careers. The following state policies, described more fully below, can help youth graduate from high school and encourage them to enroll in and succeed at postsecondary education:

- Minimize school changes by keeping foster youth in the same school;
- Work with foster youth and school administrators to track academic records;
- Ensure coordination and monitoring of Individual Education Plans (IEPs);
- Raise awareness about educational and job training options for foster youth;
- Connect students with mentors and on-campus support for postsecondary success; and
- Waive tuition for and offer scholarships to foster youth who attend state higher educational institutions.

**Minimize school changes by keeping foster youth in the same school.** Foster youth fall behind academically and are at risk of being unprepared to pursue postsecondary education because of the number of school changes and disruptions that often occur throughout their education. One-third of foster youth in the Northwest study experienced 10 or more school changes from elementary through high school.<sup>26</sup> Since it takes the average child four to six months to recover academically after each school change, many children in foster care lose ground.<sup>27</sup> Children in foster care often move to new home placements within the same school district or close enough to the school of origin that transportation can reasonably be provided to avoid another school change. The Fostering Connections Act (discussed in Chapter I) requires child welfare agencies to coordinate with local educational agencies to ensure that a child remains in the school that they were enrolled in at the time of removal unless it is not in the child’s best interest. Many states already have policies in place that encourage continued attendance in the school of origin and, in some cases, offer low-cost transportation options to enable youth to stay in their school even if they are placed in homes outside of the school district. The Fostering Connections Act also increases the amount of federal funding that may be used to cover education-related transportation costs for children in foster care.

The **Pennsylvania** Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) has clearly delineated the responsibilities county children and youth agencies have regarding educational stability for foster children, which are designed to ensure that no child falls through the cracks. The OCYF Bulletin 3130–08–01 describes policies and procedures related to the timely handling of case records, ensuring school stability, providing children and youth with disabilities with educational decision-makers, and having a central point of contact for education.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the policies outlined in the bulletin, the state’s Department of Education, OCYF, and advocacy community are leveraging their long-standing working relationship to design and implement a process to determine whether and how children can remain in their schools of origin in the event of out-of-home placements.



**Work with foster youth and school administrators to track academic records.** Accurate school records are not only necessary for timely enrollment in a new elementary or high school but are essential for admission to a postsecondary institution. The Fostering Connections law addresses the issue of academic records in primary and secondary schools by mandating that in cases where it is not in the best interest of the child to remain in his or her school of origin the student must be enrolled in a new school with all educational records provided.

Keeping Maine's Children Connected, a multiagency collaborative initiative started by the Maine Children's Cabinet, promotes educational success for all youth who experience disruptions in their educational program. Because foster children are most likely to experience a placement disruption, most youth served by the program are in foster care. The goal of the initiative is to simplify the transition to and from school so that students can stay connected or get reconnected to their educational programs as soon as possible. The partnership created a standardized system of communication among school districts, state agencies, correctional facilities, and inpatient psychiatric facilities. Each of these institutions trains a liaison to identify the best people in a youth's life to support the youth in transition. A statewide database lists all the liaisons, ongoing training and meetings for liaisons, and interagency systems training so staff can learn more about other disciplines and agencies. Keeping Maine's Children Connected improves educational outcomes for foster youth by reducing the number of school transitions they experience.<sup>29</sup>

**Ensure coordination and monitoring of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).** An estimated 30–40 percent of children and youth in foster care in the United States receive special education services.<sup>30</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all youth with an IEP over the age of 16 also have a transition plan for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living.<sup>31</sup> Given the frequency with which youth in foster care change schools—often several times a year—foster care case workers are often the constant voice in making educational decisions for foster youth. For this reason, it is critical for case workers to coordinate and monitor the IEPs of foster youth with disabilities.<sup>32</sup>

In **Virginia**, the Comprehensive Services Act (CSA) pool fund pays for two services in a child's IEP as required by Part B of IDEA: private day education and residential services. In addition, CSA pool funds can be used to support family members of children with an IEP to prevent a more restrictive placement or to assist in transitioning a child back to the community school. These services require the involvement of the Family Assessment and Planning Team and the development of an Individualized Family Service Plan.<sup>33</sup>

**Raise awareness about educational and job training options for foster youth.** Many foster youth do not apply to college because they are not aware of the opportunities available to them or of the value of postsecondary education. One way to combat this is for case workers, teachers, and foster parents to set the expectation that foster youth will enroll in postsecondary education and training after completing high school<sup>34</sup> and to work to educate youth about their options.

Youth who are transitioning out of foster care often lack the means to pay for college. Like most students, the only viable option for foster care youth to pay for postsecondary education is to apply for federal student aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA) of 2007 (P.L. 110–84) eliminated the requirement that students provide financial information from their parents to determine eligibility for college assistance. The CCRAA expanded the definition of “independent student” to include unaccompanied youth such as foster care youth. Verification of the youth’s situation now can be made by an authority such as a financial aid administrator or a McKinney–Vento Act school district liaison.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the fact that officials other than a youth’s parent may now sign the FAFSA, there are still many complexities in the FAFSA—and in the higher education application process in general—that foster care youth may need assistance with.

A trifecta of programs in **Washington** assist foster youth on their path to higher education. The Treehouse Coaching-to-College program in King County matches high school foster youth with volunteer coaches who encourage them to pursue postsecondary education options. The coaches help foster youth with college and financial aid applications and identify potential career paths. The Washington State Governor’s Scholarship for Foster Youth helps youth who will emancipate from the state or from a federally recognized foster, group, or kinship care program to enroll in and complete degrees or certificates at eligible Washington colleges. Youth receive a mentor for the first two years of college and need-based scholarships ranging from \$2,000 to \$4,000. The Foster Care to College Partnership (FCTCP) initiative that began in 2006 and ended in 2009 was aimed at increasing the high school graduation and college attendance rates for youth aging out of foster care. FCTCP established a systemwide education pathway to college that included disseminating information, training social workers and caregivers, and providing direct educational services to youth. An evaluation of the three-year initiative found that its information-dissemination campaign increased on-time high school graduation and college enrollment rates. Students who participated in the mentoring program were more likely to enroll in college than nonparticipating youth. In addition, just 40 percent of students felt ready for college before attending the summer program, but 80 percent felt ready after the summer program. These students were also more likely than nonparticipants to attend college. FCTCP was funded by foundations and led by six different state and community agencies in Washington state.<sup>36</sup>

**Connect students with mentors and on-campus support for postsecondary success.**

College students who come from the foster care system tend to require more attention than other first-generation college students because of their background and independent status.<sup>37</sup> They often lack a permanent support system to rely on for things like assistance with financial aid, emotional support, and a place to go for holidays and school breaks. Enrolling in postsecondary education is just the first step in the journey for foster care youth; persisting and succeeding in college is the true long-term challenge. Comprehensive student supports must include attention to year-round housing and other basic needs, financial aid, academic advising, career counseling, and adult mentors.<sup>38</sup>



In 2009, the Tallahassee Community College in **Florida** founded the Fostering Achievement Fellowship (FAF) program that provides a comprehensive support structure to assist youth who are aging out of the foster care system. The goals of the FAF are to mentor and support foster care youth through completion of a diploma or degree at Tallahassee Community College, increase the transfer rate of foster youth into bachelor's degree programs, and develop life skills and financial independence among fellowship recipients. The FAF achieves these goals by providing foster youth with adult mentors, life-skills training, financial support, and caring role models. The services provided by FAF position foster youth to thrive at Tallahassee Community College.

States have also successfully used education summits to encourage institutions of higher education to engage with, and provide specialized services for, foster youth. Since April 2007, **Michigan** has held five regional Foster Care Higher Education Summits that have been attended by roughly 40 higher education institutions. The summits focused on promising models for serving students who are in the foster care system and are not in college. As a result of these summits, Western Michigan University (WMU) began its Seita Scholarship program, which is a comprehensive program that pays for tuition to WMU and offers assistance such as year-round housing, tutoring, mental health services, mentoring, and career planning. The Seita Scholarship program has shown promising results: from 2008 to 2009, the grade point average (GPA) among students in the program increased from 1.91 to 2.48.<sup>39</sup>

To better connect its foster care youth with higher education, the **Connecticut** Department of Children and Families formed a partnership with other state and community service providers. The goal of the Connecticut Postsecondary Education (PSE) Committee is to transition foster youth to postsecondary options and support them through graduation. The committee hosted several conferences to educate institutions of higher education and community stakeholders about ways to enhance services for foster youth on college campuses. Currently six private and public higher education institutions have various programs designed for foster youth. This collaboration illustrates that even though the population of youth aging out of foster care is small, colleges are starting to acknowledge and address the unique challenges these young people face.

**Waive tuition for and offer scholarships to foster youth who attend state higher educational institutions.** Youth who have aged out of the foster care system are more likely to live at or below the poverty level and generally lack the financial support of parents to help pay for college.<sup>40</sup> Tuition is often the largest expense for foster youth who attend college. But for some youth attending community colleges, covering the cost of room and board, books, and clothing may be harder than covering tuition. More than 30 states—**Maine, Michigan, and Massachusetts** among them—provide state-funded scholarships, grants, or tuition waivers to foster youth who attend college.<sup>41</sup>

The **Washington** Passport to College Promise program is designed to encourage foster youth to prepare for and succeed in college. In addition to providing scholarships, the program offers guidance from college academic and financial aid counselors; assistance finding housing during school breaks and the summer; special consideration for the State Need Grant and State Work Study financial aid programs; and help finding student



employment.<sup>42</sup> Another component of the Passport to College Promise program is Supplemental Educational Transition Planning (SETuP), which provides foster care youth with comprehensive information on:

- Postsecondary educational opportunities;
- Sources of financial aid, transportation, and housing;
- How and when to apply to postsecondary educational programs;
- What pre-college tests are recommended based on students' postsecondary plans;
- What courses to take to prepare for postsecondary plans;
- Linkages to current services; and
- SETuPs developed in collaboration with youth ages 14 to 18 and their school.

In 2007, **North Carolina** implemented the North Carolina Postsecondary Education Support Scholarship program (NC Reach). Under this program, youth who were adopted from foster care on or after their 12th birthday or who aged out of the foster care system in North Carolina are eligible for a scholarship that pays for them to attend any branch of the University of North Carolina or any community college in the state. NC Reach provides students with a wide array of support services to help them stay on track and graduate, including:

- Program coordinators who work directly with scholarship recipients to help them navigate college and connect with local resources;
- Trained adult volunteer mentors who provide advice, encouragement, and a “listening ear” and help prepare students for the workforce;
- An array of professionally taught seminars and workshops to help strengthen academic abilities, develop financial savvy, improve workforce readiness, and build life skills; and
- Career readiness activities that teach students how to apply for internships and jobs with businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies.

## CALIFORNIA'S MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Foster youth's educational stability and success is a complex issue that must involve multiple stakeholders. California has attacked this issue from all sides by engaging in a number of strategies to promote early outreach and school stability among foster youth—from the elementary school period to postsecondary education and beyond.

### California Foster Youth Education Task Force

The California Foster Youth Education Task Force is composed of subject matter experts from more than 35 organizations and agencies in the state dedicated to improving educational outcomes for foster youth. The task force ensures educational success for foster care students by increasing awareness of their education needs; promoting best and promising practices; and promoting policy improvements and reforms across educational, child welfare, and juvenile and family court systems. The task force was entrusted with implementing the recommendations of the NGA Center's 2006 Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care. The task force, which is still in place today, was instrumental in launching the Foster Ed Connection interactive Web site, <http://www.fosteredconnect.org>.

### California Assembly Bill 490 (AB 490)

The California Legislature enacted AB 490 in 2004 to give increased responsibility to school districts, county social service agencies, and other child welfare professionals to monitor and support the education of foster youth. AB 490, based on the federal McKinney-Vento provisions that protect homeless students, mandates that educators, school personnel, social workers, probation officers, caretakers, advocates, and juvenile court officers work together to serve children in foster care.<sup>43</sup> For example, when making an out-of-home placement, the placing agency must consider the placement's proximity to the child's current school and the impact the placement will have on the child's educational stability. It must also notify the court, the child's attorney, and the educational representative or surrogate parent within 24 hours if the proposed placement or placement change would result in the youth having to go to a different school.<sup>44</sup>

### Campus Support Programs

Campus Support programs—Guardian Scholars, Renaissance Scholars, and the ACE Scholars program—are partnerships involving community colleges, campuses in the California State University and University of California systems, several independent colleges, child welfare agencies, community-based organizations, and private foundations. The goal of all of these programs is to connect disadvantaged former foster youth with postsecondary education and training at state colleges and universities. The program combines public and philanthropic funds to provide comprehensive five-year scholarships to former foster youth every year. Recipients receive priority for housing, mentoring and academic advice, financial aid, scholarships, employment opportunities, and other on-campus and social supports.

### Partnership with the Community College Foundation

The California Department of Social Services partners with the Community College Foundation to offer the Youth Development Services (YDS) program, which provides foster youth with services to transition to independence. The YDS program offers life skills workshops on community college campuses that have the added purpose of connecting foster youth to the academic, employment, and community resources available there.<sup>45</sup> This partnership maximizes the physical space of community colleges while exposing youth to experiences on community college campuses in the hope that they will be inspired to explore postsecondary opportunities.



### Higher Education Outreach and Assistance Act for Emancipated Youth

In 1996, California enacted the Higher Education Outreach and Assistance Act for Emancipated Youth, which establishes that the California State University system and the state community colleges must provide outreach and assistance to foster youth to encourage them to enroll in postsecondary education. The law requires these institutions to assist foster youth with housing, provide technical assistance to campuses, and track college retention rates of foster care youth.<sup>46</sup>



## Connect Youth with Employment and Career Training

Securing employment is a vital step on the path to self-sufficiency; yet, foster youth are more likely than their peers to be unemployed or underemployed and have insufficient income to support themselves. Such youth tend to miss out on important elements for self-sufficiency—affordable health care and social networks, for example—that are tied to employment and contribute to financial stability. Instead, 17 percent of former foster youth in the Northwest study were receiving public assistance.<sup>47</sup> Youth in the foster care system typically do not have a parental figure to teach them about applying for a job, completing a résumé, going on an interview, or behaving appropriately on a job site. Foster youth are also more apt to be academic low achievers, which further limits their opportunities for gainful employment.

One key obligation for states is to ensure that foster youth are consulted about their desired career path and then equipped with the tools they need to be self-sufficient. Many states partner with the public workforce investment system, employers, and community colleges to serve current and former foster youth more effectively. States can improve how they meet the employment needs of youth in transition by engaging in the following three strategies:

- Give youth transitioning out of foster care opportunities to learn about career options;
- Connect youth to employment opportunities; and
- Structure opportunities for youth to learn about money management.

### **Give youth transitioning out of foster care opportunities to learn about career options.**

Foster youth, like every young person, need opportunities to explore career options and to learn how to function in a professional environment. Given the low earnings of youth aging out of foster care, states are encouraged to offer targeted programs to equip youth with the skills to be more successful in the labor market.

Annie E. Casey School-to-Career Partnerships—operating in cities in **California, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, New York, Rhode Island, and Texas**—provide foster youth ages 16 to 24 with opportunities to learn workplace skills in a hands-on environment. Modeled after a public-private partnership started in Baltimore in 1999, the program offers eligible youth a variety of services, including job-readiness training; job opportunities with major employers such as UPS, Home Depot, and Marriot International; tuition reimbursement; health benefits; work supports; and job-retention services.<sup>48</sup> In 2006, more than 200 youth participating in the program were connected to job opportunities and 44 percent got jobs with either full or partial benefits. The program had an 87 percent retention rate overall.<sup>49</sup>

In **South Carolina**, the Department of Social Services has partnered with the Columbia Urban League to provide a leadership development curriculum, job shadowing, and employment for foster youth. Students attend a 20-hour summer job camp in Columbia to prepare for a six-week job-shadowing experience. Once they successfully complete the summer job camp, participants spend the next six weeks at a work site and receive a \$600



stipend. Students also attend quarterly workshops during the year. From 2004 to 2005 the state-funded program served approximately 200 students in seven counties.<sup>50</sup>

As part of its Operation Full Employment initiative, the **Florida** Department of Children and Families has successfully hired more than 100 former foster youth. Operation Full Employment challenges state agency leadership and community-based care organizations to offer employment opportunities to young adults aging out of the foster care system. The goal is to provide former foster youth with professional employment experiences where they can earn a steady paycheck.<sup>51</sup> Florida also hired a business consultant using federal Chafee funds that led to a commitment from Panera Bread to hire foster youth. Operation Full Employment gives foster youth the opportunity to explore career options and develop work skills.

**Connect youth to employment opportunities.** Partnering with existing local workforce investment boards (WIBs) through One-Stop Career Centers can be an effective way for states to connect foster youth to employment and training opportunities in high-demand fields. One-Stop Career Centers are designed to provide resources and training opportunities to job seekers and businesses. The U.S. Department of Labor allocates funding to local WIBs in part to provide services targeted to disadvantaged youth.

In 2009, **Massachusetts** partnered with state One-Stop Career Centers to discuss opportunities under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 Summer Youth Employment program. The outcome of these discussions was the creation of a single-sheet certification of eligibility for foster youth. The case worker simply filled out the form and gave it to the youth, who in turn took it to the One-Stop to prove eligibility and expedite the summer job-application process.

**Tennessee** also has engaged employers in finding job opportunities for foster youth as they age out of the system. Nashville companies such as Asurion and US Bank have earmarked job positions for former foster youth. US Bank also provides bank accounts to foster youth and matches their savings to help them buy a car, go to college, or find housing. These services help youth stabilize their personal life and enable them to hold a steady job.<sup>52</sup>

**Structure opportunities for youth to learn about money management.** Understanding how to open a bank account and manage a personal budget are important building blocks for independence. Most children and youth live with their parents until young adulthood and receive crucial guidance in financial management and life skills. Youth in foster care often do not have such resources and need formal training and education in these areas to succeed in adulthood. To take just one example, foster youth are often unaware of the consequences of using high-interest-rate credit cards and wind up with long-term credit problems.

In the absence of adults who can mentor foster youth on money issues, it is the responsibility of states to ensure that these youth are taught how to manage and save their money and are afforded opportunities to become financially literate and to practice money management. In response to this need, states are using their federal Chafee funds to provide life skills training on a variety of topics, including setting up a household,

## CONNECTICUT'S EMPLOYMENT SKILLS PROGRAMS

Connecting youth with employment and training opportunities is challenging in any economic climate, let alone during a recession. Given that college is not the goal of every foster youth, states like **Connecticut** have seen success providing youth with short-term training to boost their chances of getting high-quality jobs or to help them transition to postsecondary education.

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) operates a series of programs that help foster youth gain marketable employment skills and experiences. It helps that the state allows youth who are pursuing a four-year education to voluntarily remain in foster care until age 23. Likewise, youth who are pursuing an associate's degree or trade can remain in foster care until age 21.

### Work Learn Programs

DCF subcontracts with four community providers in New Haven, Bridgeport, Hartford, and Waterbury to administer Work Learn programs that are funded through a mixture of state funds and private grants. These programs are pre-vocational integrated learning and training experiences that develop youth age 14 and older to be critical thinkers and successful employees. Each of the four Work Learn programs operates a youth-run business where foster youth get paid to work while learning employment skills and financial literacy. As part of program's financial literacy component, youth who open and contribute to an IDA account can see their contributions matched by community providers. Connecticut matches the IDA accounts using Chafee dollars.

### Relationship with Local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs)

DCF partners with the state's five local WIBs to ensure that youth who turn 18 and choose not to pursue postsecondary education are connected to skills assessment and training experiences. It is DCF's goal that youth who participate in Work Learn programs transition to training experiences and other services offered by local WIBs.

### Memorandum of Understanding with Job Corps

DCF established a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the U.S. Department of Labor to prioritize support and transition services for DCF youth enrolled in Job Corps nationally. The MOU focuses primarily on the Job Corps centers in Region I, which covers the East Coast and Puerto Rico. The primary purpose of the MOU is to ensure that all agencies involved are communicating and delivering transitional services to each foster youth in Job Corps, which is a federally funded program available to all youth ages 16 to 24. DCF does not allocate any funding for youth to attend the program but does provide a small monthly living stipend for foster youth. Approximately 15 foster youth are currently enrolled in the Job Corps program.

managing a household, managing and developing assets, getting a driver's license and car insurance, becoming more self-confident, communicating and developing relationships, and parenting and seeing to reproductive health issues.

States can partner with foundations and private businesses to leverage funds to promote asset development among youth in foster care. One of the main vehicles used to help youth accrue assets are matched savings accounts, also known as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs). States can tap Chafee funds to establish IDAs for foster youth. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a private foundation, provides a one-to-one match of up to \$1,000 annually for IDAs opened by youth participating in its Opportunity Passport™ program. The Opportunity Passport is part of the initiative's Increased Opportunities strategy designed to help participants learn financial management. Components of the Opportunity Passport include a personal bank account, an IDA, and financial literacy training. At several initiative sites, the match is supplemented with other funds. Approved assets include education, vehicle, and housing investments; microenterprise support; and health care. The Opportunity Passport is currently being implemented in **Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, Rhode Island, and Tennessee**. As of October 2008, nearly 3,052 young people had participated in the program, depositing more than \$3.1 million in IDAs. A total of 1,068 participants purchased one or more approved assets.

Young Americans Bank in **Colorado** is the only bank designed to serve young people under age 22. The bank has more than 16,000 open accounts and, in addition to banking



services, provides loans and credit cards. The bank, which includes several non-profit programs under the Young Americans Center for Financial Education, develops financial literacy in young people through hands-on programs and real-life experiences. The Colorado Department of Human Services partners with Young Americans Bank to open accounts for foster youth and educate them about financial literacy.

## Enhance Access to Safe and Affordable Housing

Finding affordable, safe, and stable housing is critical to the ability of former foster youth to hold steady employment, continue their education, or care for their children. Many foster youth who age out report being homeless at least once after being discharged from custody. As youth exit the system, they likely do not have steady incomes, stable credit or rental histories, or bank accounts and references. This situation makes it difficult—if not impossible—for former foster youth to secure suitable housing. In addition, these youth may not have had training on how to negotiate a lease with a landlord or know their rights as tenants.

Youth who experience homelessness are at risk for drug and alcohol dependency, physical and mental health problems, and physical and sexual abuse. Although states are required to work with foster youth who are transitioning out of foster care to create a personal transition plan, these plans often lack stable and long-term housing options. These transition plans must include, among many things, a viable housing plan for when youth are discharged from foster care. It is essential that states include safe, affordable housing options in transition plans for foster youth so that they are successful in their move to adult life.

To address the need for safe, affordable housing for youth leaving foster care, states are encouraged to solicit input from foster youth on their housing options. Specifically, states can create linkages between state and local housing authorities and community-based organizations and support the placement of youth into safe and stable housing.

**Create linkages between state and local housing authorities and community organizations.** Rental subsidies can literally save the lives of some former foster youth by enabling them to afford a safe place to live. However, rental subsidies, like most government services, are limited. Partnerships among state and local housing authorities and community-based organizations can pool rental subsidies and leverage resources from other affordable housing programs that can allow more youth to access these important supports.

Foster youth who have aged out of the foster care system are eligible for rental assistance vouchers under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Family Unification Program (FUP). FUP provides Section 8 rental assistance to families whose lack of adequate housing is a primary cause of separation, or imminent separation, of a child or children from their families. Some states, including **Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, and New York** are prioritizing youth aging out of foster care as recipients of FUP vouchers.

## COLORADO'S HOMELESSNESS OFFICE TARGETED TO YOUTH

Many agencies must be brought together to find affordable housing for foster youth. **Colorado** established an office dedicated to homeless youth services that is coordinating state efforts to ensure that foster youth—and at-risk youth in general—are connected to and placed in safe and stable housing.

Created in 2004 within the Colorado Department of Human Services, the Office of Homeless Youth Services (OHYS) acts as the primary coordinating body and public voice for homeless and runaway youth in the state. The OHYS works with leaders from state and local government, private non-profit organizations, federal departments, homeless and formerly homeless youth, and other key community stakeholders to leverage resources and create strategic solutions to the issue of youth homelessness. The office's goals are to:

- Identify and remove obstacles to the provision of services to homeless youth;
- Improve the quality of services provided to homeless youth;
- Reduce needless expenditures caused by the provision of overlapping services; and
- Identify funding resources available to entities serving homeless youth.

Since 2004, OHYS has worked to build Colorado's services and supports for homeless youth through regular meetings of an advisory committee, developed partnerships with non-profits such as the United Way, and strategically blended funding streams.

In addition to the work of the OHYS, the Colorado Department of Human Services recently received federal funding for a Rural Collaborative for Homeless Youth and Families. The collaborative will engage six geographically dispersed, rural sites along with four urban partners and state agencies to implement innovative strategies to support rural runaway and homeless youth. It will also endeavor to create local and regional systems of care for homeless youth, adults, and families.

OHYS also engages with Mile High United Way in Denver, Colorado, a key partner in supporting youth in transition. The organization provides asset training and connections to a care management network of support for current and former foster youth and also acts as a liaison between the state and nonprofits. Mile High United Way partners with the OHYS to provide daily administration and support for the Family Unification Program (FUP) transitional housing vouchers for homeless and inadequately housed former foster youth. Another key partner is Urban Peak, which is the largest organization in the state providing shelter, supportive housing, and services for homeless youth in Denver and Colorado Springs.

The **Michigan** State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) allocated \$3 million for rental assistance over a two-year period at nine homeless youth projects around the state. Grants were awarded to affordable housing contractors who certified that a minimum of 25 percent of the clients they served had transitioned from foster care at age 17 or above. As of January 2010, 61 slots remained available for youth ages 18 to 24. The MSHDA Homeless Youth Initiative is intended to complement the implementation of 10-year community-based plans to end homelessness, which target foster youth and other at-risk individuals. The link with the MSHDA initiative allows the state and community-based organizations to improve access to affordable housing for former foster youth.

The Youth Housing Assistance Program (YHAP) in **Illinois** uses Chafee dollars to provide a range of services to transitioning foster youth who are at high risk of becoming homeless and either have aged out of, or are about to age out of, foster care. Youth ages 17½ to 21 receive assistance from housing advocates who help them locate housing, provide budget counseling, and connect them to community resources and social services. Youth ages 18 to 21 are eligible for cash assistance, including start-up grants of up to \$800 to cover rental deposits, furniture, and appliances; partial housing subsidies of up to \$100 a month for one year following emancipation; emergency cash assistance for housing security deposits, rent and rental subsidies, furniture, appliances, utilities, and other items needed to help youth avoid or manage a crisis.<sup>54</sup> The YHAP program stabilizes the housing situation of foster youth and prepares them to live independently.

**Support the placement of youth into safe and stable housing.** Supporting youth in housing placements means educating them about their legal rights and ensuring that they have the support they need to live independently. For example, many youth who live on



their own report that they are lonely; therefore, connecting youth with roommates and other permanent connections will enable them to maintain a healthy living environment.

In Detroit, **Michigan**, the Wayne County Housing Resource Center administered a two-year pilot project that provided information and referrals to approximately 31 former foster youth on the availability of quality, affordable rental units in Detroit, Hamtramck, and Highland Park. Participating youth received a two-year rental subsidy, supportive services, and eviction prevention services to ensure that they sustained their housing over the long term. Youth were also connected to education and employment opportunities to build assets and enhance their prospects of living independently. The pilot program ended in the summer of 2010.

## Help Youth Access and Manage Health Care

Young adults in the foster care system are at particularly high risk for physical and mental health problems due to maltreatment, trauma stemming from separation from homes and families, and the continuing disruptions in their daily lives.<sup>55</sup> For example, 13 percent of foster youth suffer from symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) after leaving foster care, compared to 5 percent of the general population. This has important physical health implications—new research from the San Francisco VA Medical Center and the University of California—San Francisco found that PTSD can cause a part of the brain involved in memory to shrink.<sup>56</sup> In addition to susceptibility to PTSD, 40 percent of youth in foster care have a disability that exacerbates their medical needs.<sup>57</sup> Case workers navigate health and mental health systems for youth while they are in foster care, but once youth age out, they are expected to plot a course through these systems independently—without adequate life experiences or the support of a responsible adult.

Many children in foster care are eligible for Title IV–E federal foster care payments and are, therefore, categorically eligible for Medicaid while in care. For children who are not categorically eligible, states take on the full financial responsibility of providing Medicaid coverage without receiving federal matching funds.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, youth lose their categorical eligibility for Medicaid at or near age 18 as they transition out of the foster care system and most do not qualify for eligibility under adult categories (such as those covering pregnant women or adults with disabilities).<sup>59</sup> The federal Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act will provide a new coverage category in 2014 for adults with incomes up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level, under which many former foster youth will likely qualify.

Even when young adults exit foster care with health care coverage, they often have difficulty accessing and making sense of the health care system.<sup>60</sup> Enrollment and service barriers are especially problematic for young adults navigating the system. Former foster youth who lack health insurance cost states more because they often put off preventive care and seek more expensive treatment in hospital emergency rooms.

States can address these challenges by using a variety of strategies, but no matter which strategies states employ, youth must be involved in their own health care and medical decisions. The federal Fostering Connections Act mandates the development of a health



## ARIZONA'S INTEGRATED HEALTH CARE RECORDS SYSTEM

Timely and accessible health records help youth manage their health. **Arizona's** system of records management is one promising approach—the state allows its agencies to coordinate care and health records so that foster youth can take their medical histories with them when they leave care. The Arizona Comprehensive Medical and Dental (CMDP) Medicaid program provides health care services to foster youth through a streamlined system that allows CMDP and Child Protective Services (CPS) staff to access the health records of every child in foster care in Arizona.

### Integrated Data Systems

One unique advantage of Arizona's Medicaid program is that it is housed within the Department of Economic Security (DES) along with CPS, allowing for data sharing. Systems are set up to transfer data between Medicaid and CPS nightly, which allows Medicaid to establish eligibility for foster youth within five days of entering the CPS system. The ability of Medicaid and CPS to share data significantly enhances the ability of these departments to serve foster youth within their care. The ease of data sharing and communication between Medicaid and CPS staff allows health services to be delivered in a timely fashion.

The Arizona Medicaid system creates an electronic health record for each foster youth enrolled in the system. These records are transmitted to CPS for transfer to youth as they transition out of foster care.

### Mandated Health Screenings

Arizona statute mandates that foster children receive a medical screening within 60 days of their removal. CMDP also partners with the Arizona Health Services Division of Behavioral Health Services (BHS) so that, within 24 hours after a child has been removed from his or her biological parent's home, or even before the child is removed, he or she receives a comprehensive behavioral health assessment and is automatically enrolled in the behavioral health system regardless of eligibility. As a result of CMDP's partnership with BHS, 90 percent of children in Arizona receive a behavioral health assessment within 24 hours of removal. This significantly bolsters CPS' ability to make informed health care decisions on behalf of youth.

### Young Adult Transitional Insurance

In 2000, a new Medicaid category for foster youth was created within the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System based on the passage of Fostering Connections. The Young Adult Transitional Insurance (YATI) category was created specifically for young adults who turn 18 while in foster care and is available for youth up to age 21. Youth do not have to stay in foster care to receive health coverage through YATI. Foster youth are automatically enrolled in YATI on their 18th birthday and can renew on a yearly basis.



**Develop mechanisms to help youth track their medical histories.** The medical records of foster youth are often incomplete and difficult to locate as result of many moves, lost records, and lack of access to their biological parents' medical histories. An individual's medical history and that of his or her biological parents can provide important information for preventing and treating medical issues. It is therefore essential that states compile and preserve the medical records of youth in foster care so that they can make informed decisions about their health as adults. The Fostering Connections Act requires states to develop a plan for the ongoing oversight and coordination of health care services for any child in foster care in consultation with the state Medicaid agency, pediatricians, and other experts in health care and child welfare.

In 2008, **Texas** created the Health Passport, an electronic health information system that captures the medical information of every child in the foster care Star Health system. The Health Passport consolidates the medical information of these youth and makes it available to health providers and to staff in the Department of Family and Protective Services. When youth are discharged from the foster care system they take their Health Passport records with them, enabling them to make informed medical decisions.<sup>63</sup>

In 2009, **Florida** passed legislation (Senate Bill 126) that provides current and former foster youth, as well as foster parents and guardians, with access to youth's personal records, including case information, family medical history, and other vital information. The Florida Department of Children and Families is required to keep complete and accurate records of children in the



foster care system accessible until they reach their 30th birthday. This requirement makes it possible for former foster youth to access their personal records as adults for medical, education, employment, and other purposes. This law allows state and local agencies to share vital information and maintain compliance with confidentiality laws so the state can provide more coordinated services to children in foster care.<sup>64</sup> Florida is a pioneer in this area—many states either do not allow this access or do not keep records up to date for youth after they exit care.

## Help Youth Build Stable and Lifelong Relationships

The transition to adulthood is challenging for every adolescent, but for youth in foster care these challenges are further compounded by instability. As a result of many disruptions—such as multiple placements, school changes, and placements in institutional settings—foster youth are often disconnected from family and social networks and, therefore, lack the support that can help them overcome hardships as they transition to adulthood. Twenty-five percent of youth ages 15 to 20 emancipate from the foster care system without achieving a permanent connection to a family or social network.<sup>65</sup> Permanent connections vary from a relationship with a caring adult to adoption or guardianship to some other social connection. These connections provide young adults with emotional support, guidance on employment and education, and assistance in times of emergency. The goal is that all youth leave foster care as part of a “family,” whether through reunification with biological parents, another guardianship, or to an adoptive family.



Research shows that youth with a caring adult somehow involved in their lives fare much better in adulthood. Youth who lack these supports face difficult life challenges and often come to rely on state mental health, substance abuse, and homeless services programs.<sup>66</sup> Youth who age out of the foster care system without a permanent connection to a family or caring adult can be costly to states.

Caregivers play a considerable role in steering youth to make healthy decisions. It follows that youth who age out of the foster care system without a permanent connection to a family are at higher risk of becoming involved in unhealthy and costly behaviors such as crime and substance abuse. For example, a cost analysis by Cutler Consulting estimated that the involvement of former foster youth in the criminal justice system costs in excess of \$4 billion over the lifetime of each annual cohort of youth exiting foster care.<sup>67</sup>

However, not all permanency options are equally desirable or designed to serve the same purposes. Case workers, judges, and other decision-makers can work with older youth to develop permanency plans that connect them with caring adults who will support their healthy transition to adulthood. It is critical for youth to have a voice in and play an active role in their permanency planning process. States can help youth explore the viability of various permanency options in the following four ways, discussed more fully below:

- Connect youth to family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles;
- Establish legal guardianships or other permanent arrangements;
- Help youth develop relationships with caring adults; and
- Explore the viability of reunification with biological parents (when appropriate).

**Connect youth to family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles.** Youth in foster care are separated from their parents for safety reasons, but extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles often are able to support youth as they transition to independence. One way to lessen the trauma youth experience when they are removed from their home is for states to immediately place youth with relatives. Placement with relatives at any point during foster care promotes stability and security for youth. Relatives can also be sought out as more informal supports for youth as they transition into adulthood and can become part of the youth's ongoing support system. Often, relatives are not aware that a child related to them is in a foster care placement. States can do regular, diligent searches for relatives who might be interested in caring for child relatives in foster care. States can also expand placement options by amending the definition of relative to include other kinship options that have strong relationships with the child and family but may not be biologically related.

When youth are placed with relatives, they must meet the rigorous licensing standards set for foster parents—including safety and physical space requirements—to qualify for financial support from the state. States can work with relatives to meet the strict licensing standards set for foster parents. The Fostering Connections Act allows states to waive nonsafety licensing standards for relatives to eliminate barriers to placing children safely with family members in licensed homes.

**Connecticut** began licensing relatives in 2005 with a process in place for waiving certain regulatory requirements to license relatives. The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) Licensing Review Team (LRT) meets at least once a month to review requests to waive certain licensing standards for relatives, such as square footage and room requirements. A final decision on the waiver request is rendered within five business days of the LRT meeting. The LRT is composed of individuals and members of divisions within DCF's central office such as the Deputy Commissioner, Director of the Office of Foster Care Services, Legal Division, Bureau of Behavioral Health, and Ombudsman.<sup>68</sup> The LRT waiver process promotes timely permanency for foster care youth. Connecticut's policy for licensing relatives and entertaining waivers for nonsafety-related standards is consistent with the new relative caregiver provisions set forth in Fostering Connections.

**Establish legal guardianships or other permanent arrangements.** A permanent arrangement such as adoption or guardianship provides the greatest support and stability for foster youth who cannot be safely reunified with their family and leads to greatly improved outcomes for youth. State systems typically do not prioritize permanency options like adoption or guardianship for youth beyond the age of 14. Case workers focus on finding adoptive homes for younger children and assume older youth will age out of the foster care system. Although not always considered, adoption is a desirable outcome for older youth and an increasing number of older youth are pursuing adoptive relationships with adults even beyond age 18.

States can implement policies to further support adoption and guardianship for older youth. Alternatively, youth can be placed with relatives who become guardians. This is a legal, permanent situation that contributes to youth's stability and sense of normalcy. Legal guardianship can be closed if a biological parent later proves they are able to care for the child or when the child turns age 18. In 2008, Fostering Connections gave states new incentive to expand legal guardianship arrangements between youth and their relatives by allowing them to use federal Title IV–E funds to make kinship guardianship payments on behalf of youth in foster care and to draw down federal funds at the FMAP rate.

**Maine's** Permanency Guardianship Policy provides a flexible permanency option by not requiring that parental rights be terminated before guardianship arrangements are made for youth in foster care. Maine also provides a financial subsidy to relatives and other individuals who become legal guardians of children in state or tribal custody.<sup>69</sup> By providing a subsidized permanency guardianship program, Maine enhances guardianship resources and, as a result, has increased the number of relatives who became guardians, thus boosting permanency rates.<sup>70</sup>

**Help youth develop and maintain relationships with caring adults.** Building a social network of caring adults is an important piece of reaching independence. Caring adults serve as touchstones that help youth make informed decisions and with whom youth share their successes and disappointments. Even youth who achieve more permanent arrangements through reunification, adoption, or guardianship can benefit from connections to other adults in their community. Relationships with caring adults outside of the “family” are uniquely beneficial to youth because they may be able to offer career advice or share other interests that family members are not familiar with.

A **California** law (2003 Cal. Stats., AB 408, Chap. 813) requires child welfare agencies to take actions so that no child leaves foster care without a lifelong connection to a committed adult. Specifically, the law mandates that, for every child in foster care who is 10 years or older, the court is required to determine whether the child welfare agency has made reasonable efforts to maintain relationships with individuals important in the child's life. Under this law, county child welfare agencies must train their case workers on the importance of maintaining permanent relationships. County child welfare agencies are also required to convene individuals important to the child at key decisionmaking points, including when case plans are made for youth age 16 or older and when the child's transitional independent living plan is developed.<sup>71</sup> The law aims to ensure that youth in foster care are connected to a social network during and after their time in foster care.



## IN MASSACHUSETTS, A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO PERMANENCY

There is no one permanency strategy that will meet the need of every foster youth. States such as **Massachusetts**, therefore, have implemented a variety of programs to provide permanency options for foster youth. The Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) offers targeted programs that help foster youth achieve permanency. These programs are continuously improved through staff innovation and youth input.

### Breakthrough Series Collaborative

In 2005, DCF launched the statewide Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Adolescent Permanency to improve, practice, and support its commitment that every child who leaves DCF will go into the care and support of a family or have an enduring supportive relationship with at least one caring adult. The Breakthrough Series model encourages staff innovation through rapid progress with team members testing small but significant promising strategies to achieve permanency for youth. Each DCF area office develops its own team of directors, supervisors, social workers, foster parents, providers, and youth. The teams work to identify the barriers to good practice, identify and test various strategies to overcome those barriers, and then share their ideas and strategies with other teams. Major strategies implemented to date include reissuing a state policy allowing youth over the age of 18 to return to care, reviews and updates of permanency planning policies, and updates to the permanency goals allowed by the state. These BSC outcomes led to the following changes in Massachusetts:

- An increase in guardianships and adoptions for older youth;
- Changes in service plans goals to eliminate “long-term foster care” and “independent living;”
- Development of “Finding Families” pilots; and
- Changes to permanency planning hearings that increased youth participation and created a more focused review of youth’s progress toward permanency goals.

### Mentoring Program

DCF also administers a mentoring program for older youth that was created in response to the long waiting lists and age limits at community organizations that pair at-risk youth with mentors. One initiative allows foster youth and DCF staff to collaborate to seek mentors from among the adults recruited to serve as foster parents. This allows individuals who are interested in becoming foster parents in the future to experience the system first as mentors.

### Internship Program

The DCF-administered internship program places foster youth in internships with an employer in a field in which they are or may be interested. DCF staff form partnerships with employers and support youth before, during, and after the internship. Participation in an internship gives youth the opportunity to gain work skills and to explore a field of work. In 2009, 12 percent of youth who completed their internship were hired on permanently. In addition, youth have said that their internship served as a natural way to make a positive connection with someone in their workplace who has become their mentor. There are currently 50 foster youth placed in internships throughout the state.

### Lifelong Connections

Massachusetts provides other state programs to promote lifelong connections to caring adults that involve training and supportive services to help strengthen and sustain the relationships between youth and their adoptive parents or guardians; subsidies to the permanent legal guardians of youth who leave foster care so they can live with a guardian when adoption or reunification is not an option; and services to relatives who provide supports to youth when adoption or reunification is not an option.

### Explore the viability of reunification with biological parents (when appropriate).

Parental support from youth’s family of origin is arguably the most important contributor to successful transitions to independence.<sup>72</sup> Many youth who emancipate from the foster care system after age 18 return to live with their biological parents. This unsupervised transition can be dangerous considering that foster youth were initially removed from the home for safety reasons. States should consider offering support to foster youth who are interested in reunification to ensure that the transition is safe and successful.

**Connecticut** is creating an Adolescent Connection/Reconnection Policy intended to support youth who plan to pursue connections with their birth family, regardless of the



circumstances. Under this policy, case workers will provide older adolescents with information and skills development about establishing a safe, adult, nondependent relationship with a family member while living separately and independently. This policy acknowledges that many youth will seek out their biological parents; therefore, its purpose is to structure a reconnection that is facilitated and where youth are in full view of the strengths and challenges of such connections.

The **Illinois** Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) Service Plans Improvement and Foster Permanency Changes Act (HB 529), which became law in January 2010, allows the court and DCFS to review the cases of children who are age 13 and over to determine whether parents whose rights have been terminated can be restored. A court review under this act will not always return a child to the custody of his or her parent; rather, it allows the court to oversee services and visitations with the aim of helping youth understand and better manage relationships with family members and be more successful in the transition to adulthood.<sup>73</sup>

**Extend Foster Care to Age 21.** Extending foster care to age 21 is the foundational strategy underlying each of the five preceding state strategies to help youth transition out of foster care. Research suggests that youth who remain in foster care voluntarily after age 18 as an alternative to emancipation are more likely to advance their education, have stable housing, stay out of the juvenile justice system, receive independent living services, and have access to health care and mental health services.<sup>74</sup> These positive outcomes benefit society in the form of higher earnings and deferred costs to state systems. It is recommended that states support foster youth beyond age 18 to at least the age of 21 by allowing them to remain in care voluntarily.

In many states that extend care past age 18, foster youth can only remain in care if they are enrolled in an educational activity (such as finishing high school or attending a postsecondary institution) or have a special need or disability. A few states, including **Arizona**, **Idaho**, and **Illinois**, allow youth to remain in care unconditionally. An important policy option for states that extend foster care beyond age 18 on a voluntary basis is to implement a "return policy" for youth who leave foster care at 18 and decide that they want to return. A return policy will allow foster youth who experience difficulties to return to state care, where they are assured of having health insurance, housing, and continued support.

Extending foster care past age 18 is a cost for states. In an effort to help states financially support foster youth beyond age 18, Fostering Connections allows states to claim federal reimbursement at the FMAP rate under Title IV-E to care for and supervise eligible foster youth until age 21. Although states have the option to extend care to youth ages 19, 20, or 21, it is recommended that they extend care up to the age of 21 for youth to fully benefit.

In light of the new option under Fostering Connections to extend care to age 21, **Iowa** and **Tennessee**, in partnership with the nonprofit The Finance Project, conducted a fiscal analysis of extending care to age 19 and to age 21.<sup>75</sup> Iowa concluded that the net cost to extend foster care to age 21 would be \$425,000 in fiscal year 2011 and \$1 million in fiscal year 2015 based on the phase in of the program. Tennessee concluded if 70 percent of eligible youth elected to remain in care the net cost would be \$2.9 million in fiscal year 2011 and \$5.4 million in 2015.

# Chapter 3





## Putting It All Together: Cross-System Approaches to Better Serve Foster Youth in Transition

**W**ith growing knowledge of what foster youth need to succeed in life and the availability of new resources, states are well-positioned to reverse the negative outcomes experienced by the small but growing number of youth transitioning out of foster care each year. As this report suggests, states should focus on multiple goals to ensure that foster youth are prepared for the challenges of young adulthood by:

- Promoting educational attainment;
- Connecting youth with employment and career training;
- Enhancing access to safe and stable housing;
- Helping youth access and manage health care; and
- Helping youth build stable, lifelong relationships.

To prepare foster youth for adulthood, states should undertake a series of complementary strategies that target gaps in services to these young people. States can also begin to assess their progress by using outcome data to understand how their policies are impacting foster youth and what can be done to make further improvements. The National Youth in Transition Database is one tool that states will have at their disposal beginning in 2011. It will be used to track outcomes for independent living services provided to youth in foster care, to assess the outcomes of youth who age out of foster care, and to provide states with data to enable better foster youth policy decisions overall.

The recently enacted Fostering Connections Act is another important source of funding to serve youth in transition. National, state, and community philanthropic institutions and local businesses are also demonstrating a growing willingness to support initiatives that help foster youth successfully transition into healthy, productive adults.

These and other opportunities make now an opportune time for states to do much more to serve foster youth in transition. The rewards of a better system—for young people and for states—are manifestly more than the costs.

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## NGA CENTER DIVISIONS

The NGA Center is organized into five divisions with some collaborative projects across all divisions.

- **Economic, Human Services & Workforce** focuses on best practices, policy options, and service delivery improvements across a range of current and emerging issues, including economic development and innovation, workforce development, employment services, research and development policies, and human services for children, youth, low-income families, and people with disabilities.
- **Education** provides information on best practices in early childhood, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. Specific issues include common core state standards and assessments; teacher effectiveness; high school redesign; science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education; postsecondary education attainment, productivity, and accountability; extra learning opportunities; and school readiness.
- **Environment, Energy & Transportation** identifies best practices and provides technical assistance on issues including clean energy for the electricity and transportation sectors, energy and infrastructure financing, green economic development, transportation and land use planning, and clean up and stewardship of nuclear weapons sites.
- **Health** covers a broad range of health financing, service delivery, and coverage issues, including state options under federal health reform, quality initiatives, cost-containment policies, health information technology, state public health initiatives, and Medicaid.
- **Homeland Security & Public Safety** supports governors' homeland security and criminal justice policy advisors. This work includes supporting the Governors Homeland Security Advisors Council (GHSAC) and providing technical assistance to a network of governors' criminal justice policy advisors. Issues include emergency preparedness, interoperability, cyber-crime and cyber-security, intelligence coordination, emergency management, sentencing and corrections, forensics, and justice information technology.



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