

Prioritizing Transition Age Youth for Future Success

Older youth in foster care, aged 14-21, are embarking on a journey to adulthood, transitioning out of the foster care system and onto self-sufficiency. Despite the numerous challenges they face, including trauma and adverse experiences from their childhood and adolescence, often exacerbated by child welfare system involvement, these youth demonstrate remarkable resilience. Their transition from adolescence to adulthood is a pivotal period, and the support and resources they receive significantly influence their success post-foster care. By enhancing policies for transition age youth, we can ensure they are adequately supported in their journey to adulthood, maximizing their potential for success.

In 2022, over 19,000 children and youth were placed in Pennsylvania's foster care system. Approximately one-third of the population was transition-age youth. Of the transition age youth in the foster care system in 2022, only 57.9% were placed in a family-based setting, such as kinship or foster care. Nearly one-third were placed in a congregate care setting, such as a shelter, residential, or congregate care. The top four reasons for transition age youth being placed in out-of-home care include child behavioral problems, caregiver inability to cope, neglect, and parental substance use. This data underlines the collective responsibility we all share in ensuring the well-being of these vulnerable youth.

To better understand how transition age youth are faring, the Annie E. Casey Foundation produced its second installment of the [Fostering Youth Transitions](#) report. The report has detailed profiles of all 50 states, along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and traces the experiences of foster youth ages 14 to 21 who were served in the foster care system between 2006 and 2021. Pennsylvania's profile demonstrates both positive and negative trends. Some of the conclusions are:

- There were fewer youth in foster care in 2021 compared to 2006—a reduction of 48%
- Placement due to neglect, or often related to poverty, is the primary reason for placement as opposed to abuse



- Increases in kinship care have led to a reduction in group care
- Youth are still struggling with exiting care to permanency
- Although extended foster care is an option for youth over 18 years old, participation is low

Transition services, such as vocational training and housing assistance, are designed to help young people in foster care transition to adulthood. However, participation in transition services is low. Only 51% of Pennsylvania’s foster care population received a service at any point between ages 14-21. Of this population, only:

- 71% utilized life skills training
- 44% utilized academic support, while only 79% graduated high school or obtained a GED
- 22% participated in educational or vocational training, while only 51% had part- or full-time employment
- 14% utilized room and board services, while 32% of youth were homeless

The [Journey to Success](#) (JTS) policy advocacy campaign seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for all youth and young adults who experience foster care. JTS, in partnership with youth leaders with lived foster care experiences across many states, identified several policy priorities that are critical to ensuring transition age youth success. The pathways include:

- Prioritizing health, healing, and well-being
- Nurturing family ties and family permanence
- Retooling foster care to better serve older youth and young adults
- Increasing accountability and focusing on fairness and results
- Ensuring that youth are plugged into supportive services, including health, education, and housing
- Promoting economic security



One of the most important ways to support transition age youth is to listen directly to their solutions. PPC convened several focus groups with former older Pennsylvania foster youth in recent years. These focus groups allowed youth to share their perceptions of current strengths and challenges in the system and solutions for adequately supporting youth through transitions. Similar to the themes highlighted by JTS, youth leaders identified the following priorities:

- **Ensuring that kinship care and kinship connections are a primary goal.** Many youth reported they were placed in formal foster care rather than with family. Additionally, even if kin could not be formally licensed, they were completely disconnected and not provided opportunities for ongoing visitation or connections through phone calls or letters. Most importantly, youth noted that connections to siblings, preferably by joint placement, are lacking and frequently not occurring.
- **Ensuring that formal foster parents have the tools and resources to care for youth adequately.** Overwhelmingly, youth reported that foster parents have unrealistic expectations of them. Many reported being treated differently than biological children in the home, that foster

parents were quick to have them removed, and often didn't understand how to navigate the trauma they experienced. One recommendation is to update the training requirements for foster parents and have additional crisis case management support to provide trauma-informed care when difficult situations arise.

- **Improving and increasing access to transition services.** Youth often feel unprepared to transition to independence and cannot care for themselves in the most basic ways. This includes simple tasks like managing a checking account, doing laundry, and navigating public transportation.
- **Improving economic security, including financial support through child savings accounts and increased access to housing options.** For youth that qualify for benefits (such as SSI, SSD, veterans, or death survivor benefits), creating methods of conservation of accounts that they can access upon exiting the foster care system.
- **Improving quality and increasing access to mental health, behavioral health, education, and specialized services.** Youth report having significant trauma from the situation that led to placement and additional trauma navigating (often multiple) placements. There appears to be a lack of consistency in access to services, specifically those that treat mental and behavioral health needs. Youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ reported that services to support their population are scarce, and there are not many formal networks for peer support.

While some promising trends demonstrate the child welfare system's efforts to support youth better, much more work remains. Common-sense policy solutions can be implemented now to promote better experiences for youth currently in the foster care system and support their transition out. Below are priorities federal and state policymakers must address.

Federal-level policy recommendations:

- Congress should invest in and redesign the [Chafee Program](#), including increasing financial support to states, providing greater flexibility, and making healing and family permanency a top focus.
- Congress should immediately reauthorize [Title IV-B](#) before it expires on September 30, 2024. It should include increased investments and strengthening support for kinship placement, expanding the court improvement program, supporting greater access to mental health services, and supporting the workforce.

State-level policy recommendations:

- Pennsylvania should implement the [Kin-Specific Licensing Standards](#) to reduce the administrative and unnecessary regulatory licensing requirements for kinship caregivers. This should include dedicated funding to provide potential kinship caregivers with the necessary items to prepare for becoming a full-time caretaker.
- County child welfare agencies should discontinue the practice of absorbing a youth's benefits to pay for placement services and instead conserve them into accounts to provide economic security once the youth exits the foster care system. These benefits include SSI, SSD, death survivor, and veterans' benefits.
- Ensure that transition services meet the needs of youth while also ensuring that all youth are informed of the services available while in and out of foster care.
- Require county agencies to actively engage parents, kin, foster parents, and youth in policy change. At a minimum, county agencies should hold annual convenings to listen directly to impacted communities and publicly share the action steps.



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