

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

BOUNDLESS FUTURES

Building a Youth - Focused Child Welfare System

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FOSTER YOUTH
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM®

AUTHORED BY THE 2019 CLASS OF FOSTER YOUTH INTERNS



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About CCAI



HISTORY

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a nonprofit, bipartisan organization that works to raise awareness about the needs of children without families and to remove policy barriers that hinder them from knowing the love and support a family provides. CCAI is unique in that each of our programs brings together policymakers and individuals with direct foster care or adoption experience. We have found that when policymakers hear direct experiences of those affected by child welfare policy, they become engaged in this issue and work to bring about legislative improvements in an effort to ensure each child has their right to a family realized. CCAI was founded in 2001 by advocates of the world's orphaned and foster youth. In founding CCAI, these advocates sought to match the commitment of members of Congress' Adoption Caucus, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption, with the information and resources needed to make the dream of a family a reality for every child.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute is dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children around the world in need of permanent, safe, and loving families and to eliminating the barriers that hinder these children from realizing their basic right to a family.

Executive Director Foreword

It is a true honor to introduce to you the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's 2019 Foster Youth Interns, the authors of this policy report.

Anthony, Joshua, Lily, Ria, David, Sheree, Mackenzie, Alex, Lino, Chris, Aleks, and Anna began the process of applying to the Foster Youth Internship Program® many months ago. Even those who are longtime friends of the program often do not realize that the Interns essentially fill two strenuous jobs while here in Washington, D.C.; by day, they serve as congressional interns, learning from the inside how the U.S. Congress works, and by night (and weekends), they serve as policy researchers and writers, the evidence of which you are now holding.

Juggling these two demanding roles is exhausting; but most importantly, it takes a uniquely strong, thoughtful, and determined individual to mine the difficult chapters in one's own story — their time spent in foster care — and extract hard-won wisdom with the intent of using that learning to benefit others. Each of these 12 amazing individuals has demonstrated profound tenacity and resilience as they have walked through that challenging process.

They have worked diligently because they believe, as we at CCAI do, that the results of our child welfare system are not fixed; that it is possible to effect systemic change, remove barriers, improve outcomes, and, in short, ensure that children who are still in foster care throughout the nation do not encounter the same obstacles they have had to overcome.

Thus, the ideas here are entirely their own. It has been a privilege to witness up close the passion each of them has brought to this project — to the challenge of using both their lived experience and creative policy ideas to form new bridges in the U.S. child welfare system, where now there are barriers or gaps. Their hope is to inspire champions in Congress, the Administration, and the private sector to consider and craft improvements to current child welfare policy and practice.

Once again, CCAI would like to express our gratitude to Mary Bissell and Rebecca Robuck of ChildFocus. We were so very grateful to partner with them in the Foster Youth Interns' report writing process this summer. Their expertise in child welfare policy, cheerfulness about the many deadlines, personal dedication to the Interns, and overall commitment to the program has been a true gift to our team and to the mission.

Finally, we must profusely thank those who continue to invest in CCAI's mission and these inspiring young leaders. A program of the magnitude of CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program® would simply not be possible without significant investment of time, talent, and treasure. Now in its 17th year, the Foster Youth Internship Program® boasts over 200 alumni currently serving in leadership positions in child welfare, business, government, and philanthropy across the nation. From our Board of Directors and Advisory Council, to our volunteer report advisors and selection committee, to CCAI's partners and sponsors — we are deeply grateful for the robust support that enables this program to have enormous impact year after year. These groups and individuals are also listed in our Acknowledgements and Partners pages at the end of this report.

I am thrilled to introduce the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's 2019 Foster Youth Internship Program® Report, *Boundless Futures: Building a Youth-Focused Child Welfare System*.



Bethany Haley
Interim Executive Director

About the Program



The Foster Youth Internship Program® is a signature program of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute.

CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program® (FYI) is a highly esteemed congressional internship for young adults who have spent their formative years in U.S. foster care. Since 2003, the FYI Program has provided the Foster Youth Interns the opportunity to intern in a congressional office on Capitol Hill — both exposing the FYIs to the policymaking process as well as raising awareness to federal policymakers about the needs and unique perspectives of those who have spent time in foster care.

The FYI Program also offers the creative and talented Foster Youth Interns the opportunity to use their newfound understanding of Capitol Hill and federal policy to research and write a policy report over the course of the summer. The interns focus on topics they are personally passionate about, generally linked to their own experience in foster care, and make policy recommendations to improve the U.S. child welfare system for children who are currently in foster care. This report and its recommendations is presented by the interns in briefings to the U.S. Congress and the White House Domestic Policy Council, disseminated across the country, and for the first time in program history, presented at two additional briefings to industry leaders in the private sector and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Throughout the program, CCAI also coordinates retreats, advocacy training, networking events, and meetings with policymakers and child welfare experts. These opportunities give the Foster Youth Interns exposure to Washington, D.C. professionals, businesses, and nonprofit organizations as well as congressional offices and staff. CCAI's Foster Youth Interns network with successful members of the community who represent a wide variety of policy and non-policy related disciplines. Members of Congress also meet with the interns to discuss important issues that youth in foster care face and their shared vision for bringing about change.

After their time on Capitol Hill, our interns have gone on to work in the White House, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Veteran's Affairs, community banks, law firms, counseling groups, national child welfare organizations, and state child welfare agencies. Moreover, the Foster Youth Interns leave Washington, D.C. with experience and skills that continue to bolster their careers and provide a foundation for them to become lifelong advocates for youth in foster care.

Note: The opinions, findings, and conclusions presented in the Foster Youth Internship Program® Policy Report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the view of CCAI including leadership, donors, and partners.

Policy Report No. 1

Supporting Caseworkers to Support Positive Outcomes for Foster Youth

Anthony Abshire

Executive Summary

Caseworkers are vital to the care and protection of over 400,000 youth in the U.S. foster care system (AFCARS, 2018). These youth rely on their caseworkers for support to cope with the realities of foster care and ultimately achieve success. This high burden of responsibility placed on the shoulders of caseworkers and social workers often leads to disproportionately higher rates of burnout from the heavy demands of their jobs. To help foster youth reach their full potential, caseworkers must be better supported. This will allow states to achieve higher quality casework, reduce feelings of depersonalization among caseworkers, and improve retention rates, resulting in better outcomes for youth in care.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

In order to reduce the stress placed on child welfare caseworkers and improve outcomes for youth in foster care, Congress should:

- Scale evidence-based programs like Safe Babies Court Teams™, which uses a team model to support caseworkers through a group of professionals working on a case.
- Allow Title IV-E administrative funds to cover the cost of on-site therapy and other necessary resources for caseworkers to address issues of secondary trauma.
- Commission a national report on the child welfare workforce to identify best practices for improving the quality of casework and make recommendations for how to improve the child welfare workforce.

Personal Reflection

During my time in foster care, I lived in three states and forty-five foster homes, one group home, and a psychiatric institute. I had roughly thirty caseworkers between all those placements, but I only met about ten of them. The rest of the caseworkers I had were just names on paper. It was clear to me that even the ones I did meet never read my file, and they were often dismissed within a month or two after receiving it.

I experienced a lot of abuse and neglect while in foster care, but when I tried to report it, I never received help – I was told my caseworker was unavailable. In the off chance that they did show up, they had no idea what was going on, why I called, or what the report was even about.

While I was in care, I often blamed my caseworkers for their poor responses to my reports of abuse and neglect. I had one caseworker tell me that I had no discipline, no respect for authority, and would end up in prison rather than doing anything with my life. Another quit his job after he read my file and admitted me to the psychiatric institute. As my case became larger and more complex – I ran away many times – it seemed like my caseworkers just didn't want to deal with it.

What I realize now, though, is that my caseworkers may just have not been able to deal with it. The child welfare system places unrealistic expectations and workload requirements on caseworkers. This reduces their ability to perform their duties and protect the children they are supposed to serve.

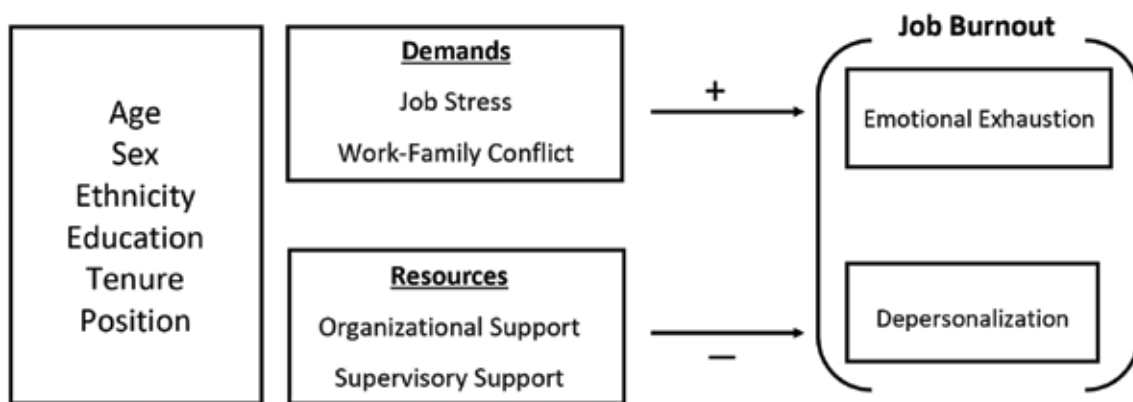
It's important that we do something about this soon. Without caseworkers who had the time and resources to take care of me, I felt abandoned and didn't think that anyone cared about me or what I was experiencing. I felt as if I needed to parent myself since I could not receive any help from those who were there to help me. After I decided no one wanted to or could help me, I started to take things into my own hands. I resorted to drugs and drinking. I lost my ability to trust others and to build and sustain any type of relationships, much less healthy ones. If my caseworkers had not been so overburdened, they might have been able to help me.

The Problem and Current Law

In a survey of child welfare caseworkers conducted by the National Association of Social Workers, 21% reported that workload was the biggest challenge of their jobs (NASW, 2004). In Texas, for example, caseloads are two to three times the national average, which results in high turnover rates, with 44% of turnover occurring in the first 13 months of being on the job (Patel et al., 2017). When a caseworker leaves, those cases are then transferred to other caseworkers who are already beyond capacity, leading more youth to have to compete for the attention of a single caseworker, and the youths' needs going unmet. In addition to the negative impact this has on youth in foster care, it leads to systemic burnout among caseworkers, which is a "special type of work-related stress: a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity" (Mayo Clinic, 2019).

Like the young people they serve, caseworkers experience trauma just by being on the job. This, along with the burnout they can experience, leads to child welfare workers depersonalizing their work, which translates into poor outcomes for their cases (CW360, 2012). Figure 1 shows how the high demands and lack of support on the job leads to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, which are the two key factors in burnout.

Workplace Demands and Resources in relation to Burnout with Public Child Welfare Workers



Lizzano, E., & Barak, M.E. (2012). Workplace demands and resources as antecedents of job burnout among public child welfare workers: A longitudinal study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 1769-1776.

Figure 1. Demands and resources that correlate with job burnout among child welfare workers. Figure retrieved from Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012.

Recent lawsuits that have been brought against child welfare agencies have made clear how this pattern impact children in foster care. In California, a grand jury found that the overwork of child welfare workers can lead to child abuse. In Mississippi, the federal government is threatening to take over the child welfare system because the state is not meeting federal standards such as not having case plans in place within the allotted time frame given to states (Bologna et al., 2019). In Rhode Island, a 9-year-old girl died in the state's foster care system because her case worker did not recognize the abuse that she experienced (NECN, 2019). To ensure these situations in Mississippi, California, and Rhode Island become the exception, not the norm, we must change the way we train and support our child welfare workforce.

Indeed, the training that caseworkers receive does not prepare them for the realities of their job or the impact that it has on them (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012). Child welfare workers must hear and deal with realities that would be hard for anyone to experience even once; caseworkers do it daily. Without adequate training and support to process and cope with the incredibly difficult and traumatizing circumstances caseworkers encounter. We cannot expect them to keep up with the demands of the job, stay fully engaged with the youth and families on their caseloads, and properly manage and close their cases.

Titles IV-E and IV-B of the Social Security Act both allow some federal dollars to be used for child welfare workforce training. This support is aimed at educating, supporting, and continuing the education of the child welfare workforce, but it is not nearly enough to adequately support caseworkers. Federal law does not allow states to create ways to support caseworkers and help them recover from the trauma they experience on the job. It is true that caseworkers are required to have supervision; however, there is no guarantee that this happens on a regular basis, or evidence that this is an adequate solution for combating the burnout, turnover, and vicarious trauma that caseworkers experience (CW360, 2012).

Fortunately, there are some innovative approaches being developed in the field that show promising results as to how to improve support for child welfare caseworkers. One such program is the Safe Baby Court Teams™ model, which uses a team-based approach to reduce stress, increase retention, and help lower rates of burnout among child welfare workers (ZERO TO THREE, 2018). The model also limits caseloads to a maximum of 20 cases. Evaluations show that it produces better outcomes for youth, increased rates of family reunification, and faster exits to permanency. Despite these impressive outcomes, this program has not been widely scaled or replicated. Scaling such programs, which are aimed at helping reduce the workloads and stress experienced by caseworkers, will help to improve outcomes for children and families.

With 44% of turnover experienced in the first year of working in child welfare, changing the way casework is done and moving towards a more evidence-based model that adds additional support for caseworkers may help change the realities for youth in foster care.

Policy Recommendations

- **Scale evidence-based programs like Safe Babies Court Teams™, which use a teaming model to support caseworkers through a team of professionals working on a case.** A team-based model helps to distribute some of the burden and responsibility placed on caseworkers, reducing stress and burnout, and helping caseworkers be more effective at their jobs. This, in turn, will improve outcomes for children in foster care and their families.
- **Allow Title IV-E administrative funds to be used to cover the cost of on-site therapy for caseworkers to address issues of secondary trauma.** Providing these services would allow caseworkers to experience less burnout and to better handle situations that lead to vicarious trauma. Caseworkers can then be more engaged with the youth and families on their caseloads, leading to higher quality casework and better outcomes.
- **Commission a national report on the child welfare workforce to identify best practices for improving the quality of child welfare caseworker and make recommendations for how to improve the child welfare workforce.** The commission should survey caseworkers, foster youth, and foster parents, and collect information on the experiences of caseworkers and how they cope with different situations (e.g. abused youth, violence). A commission would also investigate the relationships between support for caseworkers and positive outcomes for the youth and families on their caseloads, and which types of support lead to better job satisfaction and performance. Such a report would help to inform future efforts to strengthen the child welfare workforce.

Policy Report No. 2

Improving Outcomes for School-Aged Children in Foster Care

Joshua Christian

Executive Summary

Too often young people involved in the child welfare system fall behind in their education through no fault of their own, often related to trauma they experience and placement instability while in foster care. In the long term, these factors can lead to poor educational outcomes, low wages, and unemployment. The federal government can improve the educational outcomes of young people by improving its monitoring of existing laws; improving data collection of key educational outcomes of young people in foster care; expanding training on trauma for educators; and adding educational requirements to the definition of Qualified Residential Treatment Programs. Combined, these proposals will help students in foster care succeed in education and improve the understanding of the educational needs of children in foster care to inform future policy and program reforms.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should require all states applying for Title I ESSA Funding to collect in-depth data on the educational outcomes of young people involved with the child welfare system.
- The federal government should increase its monitoring of the requirements in ESSA related to improving educational stability for young people in foster care.
- Congress should require that all educators receive training on trauma and its impact on children and their learning.
- Congress should amend the *Family First Prevention Services Act* to add an educational requirement to the definition of Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP).

Personal Reflection

During my 18 years in foster care I experienced 18 different placements, and with each new placement, a different school. Although I entered foster care through no fault of my own, these frequent placement changes created challenges in many areas of my life, including my education, mental health and wellbeing, and social stability.

Just one placement change in foster care can be difficult and traumatizing. On average, young people in foster care experience PTSD at twice the rate as U.S. war veterans (Pecora et al, 2005). Like many other young people in foster care, I was forced to survive with my trauma while trying to be successful in school. Although my teachers were wonderful, they never knew what was going on at my foster home, where my siblings and I experienced various forms of abuse for almost four years. I was not focused on school because I kept moving from one home to another, trying to figure out life as a 7-year-old or 11-year-old. I was also

frequently in trouble in school. If my teachers had understood trauma, they might have recognized that I was just a scared little kid trying to figure out why everything was happening to me. I struggled throughout my entire educational career and still feel like I am playing catch up.

Transferring schools, especially due to a foster care placement change, is incredibly overwhelming. For example, students must adjust to a new environment, new people, and new curricula. I attended four different high schools: in the first one, I had seven classes per day; at the second I took four classes every other day; the third school had three trimesters instead of two semesters per academic year; and by the fourth school I went back to having seven classes a day. In addition, not all of my credits transferred, leaving me constantly feeling behind.

Group home placements were even worse for my academic success. During the time I was placed in a group home, I was not able to attend school or even access my school work. By the time I left the group home and was transferred to a new school I was even more behind compared to my peers because of this lost time while I was in the group home, the new school curriculum, and not having enough credits compared to my peers.

The Problem and Current Law

The educational outcomes of young people involved in the child welfare system are poor. Falling behind at an early age can create a domino effect in which educational challenges only grow worse over time and continue into adulthood as the young person transitions to higher education and employment.

According to the Midwest Study, a study that followed the long-term outcomes of youth who aged out of foster care, about one-fourth of young people in foster care did not graduate from high school or earn a GED, compared to 11 percent of the general population (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2009). The study also found that just three percent of young people in the study had a college degree, and only 52 percent were employed by age of 23 or 24. Among young people who age out of foster care, more than one in five become homeless, and one in four become involved with our criminal justice system (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013).

When a young person changes schools, their academic performance suffers. On average, 65 percent of young people in foster care experience more than one placement, and a little more than a third of 17- to 18-year olds in foster care move schools five or more times (Legal Center for Foster Care Education, 2018). If there is no family-based setting available, a young person will be placed in a group home or institution. In 2017, 37% of youth in foster care (age 14 to 17) were in a group home or an institution, and many of moved schools or experienced an educational disruption when that placement occurred (Child Trends, personal communication, June 25, 2019). The average reading level of 17- to 18-year olds in foster care is the 7th grade level; just 44 percent can read at a high school level or higher. (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2018)

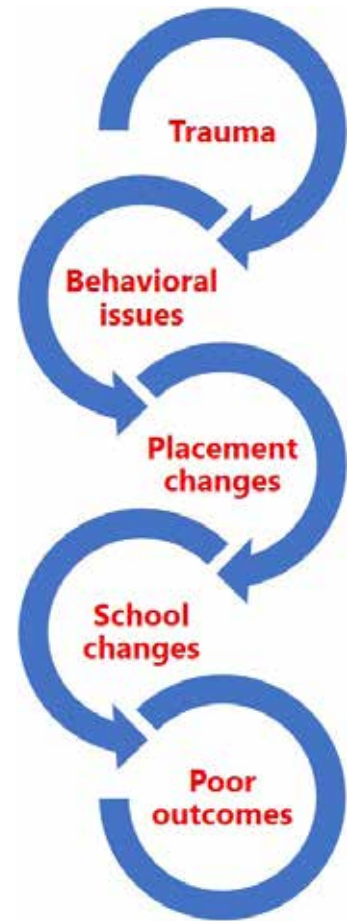
The trauma that youth in foster care experience also has a significant influence on their educational outcomes. **90 percent of young people in foster care have been exposed to trauma (Williams-Mbengue, 2016).** According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, when one undergoes trauma the effects can result in low performance both educationally and behaviorally (n.d.). 17- to 18-year olds in foster care are suspended from school at twice the rate of their peers and expelled at three times the rate of their peers. By age 21, only 65 percent of young people in foster care will finish high school compared to 86 percent of all youth between the ages of 18 and 24 (Legal Center for Foster Care Education, 2018).

In 2019, the Indiana Department of Education and Child Services collaborated on a study aimed at understanding the educational outcomes of young people in foster care. The study found that one out of five young people in foster care are suspended annually, compared to 8.9 percent of the general population (Indiana State Board of Education, 2019). Indiana released the report in 2019 and is currently developing a remediation plan to help achieve better educational outcomes. Had Indiana not collected this data, it would not have been able to identify these issues that young people in foster care are facing every year in grades K-12.

These statistics underscore how important it is to help young people in foster care succeed in education from an early age. If more states were collecting this type of data, it would not only improve the field's understanding of the educational outcomes of young people in foster care, but also inform effective interventions that would help children and youth in foster care succeed in education.

Federal lawmakers have recognized the unique educational challenges children in foster care face and have taken steps to address these challenges. In 2008, Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which required Title IV-E agencies to work in collaboration with local education agencies to help ensure school stability for children in foster care. This was the first time school stability was prioritized by federal law. In 2015, Congress passed the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), which requires local education agencies to collaborate with child welfare agencies to help promote school stability and success for youth in foster care. It also required states to report graduation rates and academic performance of school-aged children in foster care. Unfortunately, these requirements have not been widely or effectively implemented.

The *Family First Prevention Services Act*, passed in 2018, included provisions to improve group care and created a new definition for high-quality group homes known as Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) (P.L. 115-123, 2018). The QRTP provisions focus on trauma, appropriate staffing, discharge



Source: Williams-Mbengue, N. (2016). *The Social and Emotional Well-Being of Children in Foster Care*. National Council of State Legislatures.

preparation, after care supports, ensuring foster youth are still communicating with their families, and having family team meetings. However, there are no provisions aimed at supporting the educational needs of young people in foster care.

There is currently no national-level data on educational outcomes of foster youth. The federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) was expanded in 2016 to include more data elements on children in foster care, including educational attainment and educational stability (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2016). However, in April 2019 the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking that would remove the educational stability data element (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2019). While it is important to know the highest level of education, it is also important to know whether youth are staying in the same school. This data could help child welfare agencies help better meet the educational needs of kids in foster care.

Policy Recommendations

- **Congress should require all states applying for Title I ESSA funding to collect in-depth data on the educational outcomes of young people involved with the child welfare system. This is meant to be an incentive for states in order to keep acquiring Title I funding.** Robust data collection will help to focus state and local education systems on the unique learning needs of children in foster care and develop appropriate interventions to ensure their success. For example, Indiana collected in-depth data, and state leaders are using the data to create a remediation plan to better serve the educational needs of young people in foster care.
- **The federal government must increase its monitoring of the requirements in ESSA related to improving educational stability for young people in foster care.** As noted above, although Congress has already taken steps to improve educational stability for children and youth in foster care, these requirements have not been widely or effectively implemented. Increased monitoring at the federal level is necessary to ensure that these provisions are being implemented and making a difference for children in foster care.
- **Congress should require that all educators receive training on trauma and its impact on children and their learning.** Educators are in a unique position to recognize trauma in foster youth because they interact with them every single day. If teachers and students understand trauma experienced by their peers, they could help serve young people in foster care and other at-risk populations. Such a requirement could be built into education licensing standards in grades K-12, as well as educational curricula in colleges and universities. Some members of Congress have already introduced one proposal aimed at training teachers and other school personnel on trauma: the Trauma-Informed Schools Act, which amends ESSA to support trauma-informed practices in schools across the country.
- **Congress should amend the *Family First Prevention Services Act* to add an educational requirement to the definition of Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP).** This provision will ensure that young people have access to their schoolwork to maintain educational progress while in a QRTP. Another option would be that just as QRTPs are required to have licensed nursing staff, they could also be required to have access to someone on staff who can provide educational support.

Policy Report No. 3

Holistic Prevention: Supporting Informal and Diverted Kinship Families

Liliana Cory

Executive Summary

Kinship care has been shown to help mediate the trauma a child experiences upon entering the foster care system, save state staff and financial resources, and encourage stability and normalization for the child. However, children who are raised by relatives outside the child welfare system and those who are diverted to kin as a foster care alternative do not receive the same federal funding opportunities and support as children cared for by foster parents and formal kinship caregivers. In order to have equitable services for families, Congress should ensure better supports for informal and diverted kinship caregivers.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

To prevent children's unnecessary involvement in the child welfare system, Congress should expand the services and supports for grandparents and other relatives raising children by:

- Expanding the permissible use of federal IV-E foster care funding allowable for prevention services under the *Family First Prevention Services Act* (FFPSA) to include essential services for kinship caregivers.
- Creating a new “child-only” benefit under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Directing HHS to establish a Quality Improvement Center (QIC) i to standardize and share the key components of an effective Kinship Navigator Program.

Personal Reflection

When our family first moved back from Hawaii, we stayed with my aunt at her home in Everett, Washington. Although my aunt was willing to let my brother and me continue living with her, she asked my parents to seek help for their substance abuse disorders. As a family, we weren't really sure how that would work out, and we soon ended up homeless on the streets. We struggled for the next year living off of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefits. The struggle with substance use, domestic violence, and poverty was difficult, and my brother and I eventually ended up in a formal kinship foster care placement with my aunt.



Even though she was not financially equipped to take us in, my aunt graciously shared her home and the few resources she had to raise us. Because she received a foster care stipend, she also had limited state support to help my brother and me access clothing vouchers and additional financial resources, such as money to attend summer

camp and purchase other basic items. The only reason my aunt was able to support us in her home was because we had additional state support. Unfortunately, there are many other kinship families that do not have those finances, but who still provide the same stability to children who are one step closer to going into the child welfare system. These families deserve access to similar services to provide basic supports for the children they are raising.

The Problem

Why Kinship Care?

Presently, about 2.5 million children are being raised in kinship care or “grandfamilies” with no birth parents in the home (“Children in kinship”, 2018) – approximately 3.5% of all children in the United States (Generations United, 2016). In addition, 32% (140,675) of children in foster care are currently being raised by relatives, which represents an 8% increase in those children who were living in kinship foster care in 2008 (ACF 2018). Forty-eight (48) states currently give placement preference to relatives (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). For every child in foster care with relatives, there are 20 children being raised by grandparents or other relatives outside of the foster care system (AFCARS Data, 2016). As evidenced by the recent passing of the *Family First Prevention Services Act*, formal kinship care remains an important child welfare placement model that often keeps children out of other unrelated foster care and group home placements.

Research shows that children who grow up in institutional care show very significant deficits in intellectual and cognitive development (National Scientific Council on Developing Child, 2012). Furthermore, research suggests that the average number of placements children experience can be effectively reduced by placing them with relatives when they first enter care (Zinn et al., 2006). Kinship care keeps the child connected to the community and family from which they have originated. Research shows that children in kinship care experience improved placement stability, higher levels of permanency, and decreased behavioral problems (ChildFocus, 2015). Overall, kinship care has been shown to help mediate the trauma a child experiences upon entering the foster care system, saves state staff and financial resources, and encourages stability and normalization for the child.

Diversion and Informal Kinship Care

Although relative care shows positive outcomes for children, there is little systematic support for kinship providers as a whole. There are two key kinship care populations: (1) kin caring for children through formal foster care placements; and (2) children cared for by relatives outside the child welfare system (diverted/informal kin) (Walsh, 2013). While there are limited programs and resources provided to kinship foster families through monthly maintenance payments and other concrete supports such as clothing vouchers, there are few financial supports and other resources for diverted or informal kinship care providers and children. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) reports kinship care as the second highest placement for children entering the formal foster care system, and there are an estimated 400,000 children who are diverted from foster care and placed informally with relatives (Annie E. Casey,

2012) in the 39 states that report kinship diversion (Allen et al, 2007) to prevent children from entering the foster care system. Furthermore, an analysis of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II) conducted by the Carsey Institute (2013) (See Figure 1), found that the highest and most stable placement setting for children was kinship diversion.

Children who are diverted to kin as a foster care alternative do not receive the same funding opportunities and support under Title IV-E and other federal programs as children

cared for by foster parents and formal kinship caregivers. For example, foster parents and formal kinship caregivers receive a foster care stipend that typically ranges from \$500-\$1,500 per month in addition to child care costs, medical and dental costs, clothing vouchers, and liability plans (Mauldon et al., 2012). In addition to health insurance through Medicaid, the only resources available to informal and diverted kin are the TANF Child-Only Grant (\$130-\$800 per month) or locally-funded programs such as kinship navigator programs. While resources vary across states, informal kinship caregivers play the same role as kinship foster parents but do not receive equal benefits and services.

Kinship Navigator Programs

Kinship navigator programs “help fill that gap by providing caregivers with information, education, and referrals to a wide range of services and supports” (Casey Family Programs, 2018). Currently, 26 states operate over 70 kinship navigator programs (including tribal kinship navigator programs) across the United States (Casey Family Programs, 2018). Kinship navigator programs have shown promise in promoting the stability of children in kinship placements. For example, an evaluation of a kinship navigator program in Florida found both costs savings and lower rates of foster care re-entry for children whose families had utilized the program (Littlewood 2015). To expand program availability, the *Family First Prevention Services Act* authorized states to receive up to 50% Title IV-E reimbursement for the use of evidence-based kinship navigator programs. As of June 2019, the Family First Prevention Services Clearinghouse has not rated any existing kinship navigator programs as evidence-based, highlighting the need for more supports to develop, strengthen, and evaluate current models.

Current Law

While the federal programs outlined below provide critical resources and support for children raised by grandparents and other relatives outside the foster care system, they are still insufficient to meet current needs.

FIGURE 1. OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT SETTINGS AFTER MALTREATMENT REPORT AND 18 MONTHS LATER

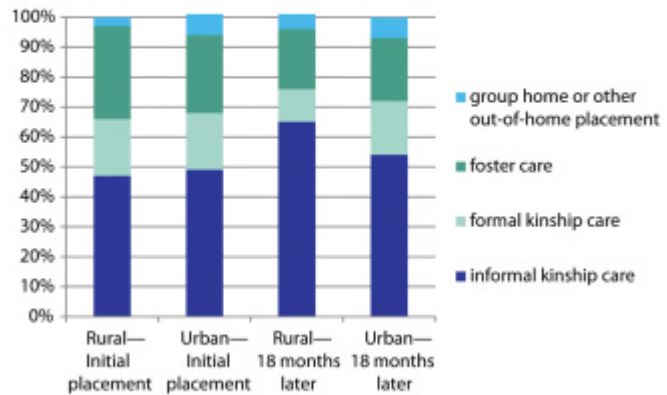


Figure 1. (Walsh, Carsey Institute, 2013)

DIVERTED/INFORMAL KINSHIP CARE: FEDERAL HIGHLIGHTS



FAST FACTS

- 2.5 million children are being raised in grandfamilies or kinship care with no birth parents in the home which is about 3.5% of all children in the United States
- 32% (140,675) of children in foster care are being raised by relatives
- For every child in foster care with relatives, there are 20 children being raised by grandparents or other relatives outside of the foster care system

Policy Recommendations

- **Expanding the permissible use of federal IV-E foster care funding allowable for prevention services under the *Family First Prevention Services Act* (FFPSA) to include essential services for kinship caregivers.** The FFPSA allows states to be reimbursed for providing in-home, skill-based prevention services for children who are candidates for foster care and placed with kinship caregivers. The law acknowledges that children informally placed with kin need supports, but it stopped short of allowing reimbursement for concrete needs and other community-based services. Support to meet concrete needs such as new beds, diapers, child care, and other supportive services such as legal and housing services are critical in stabilizing these homes and preventing foster care involvement. Current law should be expanded to allow for reimbursement of these and other basic needs for kinship families.
- **Creating a new “child-only” benefit under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).** Many kinship caregivers do not have the additional resources they need to adequately feed the children in their care. TANF child-only grants currently provide limited cash assistance to some kinship families, but those payments do not adequately cover the high costs of food, especially for multiple children. Families eligible for TANF child-only grants should automatically qualify for a new child-only SNAP benefit and be able to access to school breakfast, lunch, and summer meal programs, regardless of their caregiver’s income.
- **Directing HHS to establish a Quality Improvement Center to standardize and share the key components of an effective Kinship Navigator Program.** Kinship navigator programs are a vital link for families who need information, referrals, and ongoing supports through government and community programs. The FFPSA expanded the federal resources available to help states implement these programs, but additional assistance is needed to ensure that programs meet the law’s evidence-based requirements. To meet this need, HHS should establish a Kinship Navigator Program Quality Improvement Center (QIC) to: (1) identify and share the core elements of a model kinship navigator program; (2) establish common program outcomes and measures for evaluating kinship navigator programs; (3) provide guidance on implementation, ongoing fidelity to the model and the evaluation of kinship navigator programs; and (4) engage key stakeholders to include kinship care experts, kinship caregivers, children or youth in kinship care, kinship navigator program directors, state agency representatives, child welfare agencies, Area Agencies on Aging, other related social service agencies, and tribal nations.

Policy Report No. 4

Strengthening Post-Permanency Supports: Addressing the Need for Healing to Promote Successful Futures

Ria Esteves

Executive Summary

Although ensuring the well-being of children in foster care is a core goal of the child welfare system, it is no longer a priority for children who achieve permanency. The government recognizes that youth in care and those who have aged out are in need of emotional and mental support services, but those who “successfully” exit the foster care system to permanency must live with the consequences of their unaddressed trauma with little support. To ensure the well-being of all children who have experienced foster care, including those who have achieved permanency, Congress should require states to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment for youth who are exiting foster care and provide emotional support services for youth up to age 26.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should require all states to implement a needs assessment regarding the mental and emotional well-being of all youth who are exiting foster care to permanency.
- Congress should require all states to offer emotional support services to all youth until age 26, regardless of the amount of time they spent in formal or informal foster care.

Personal Reflection

My experience in foster care was short but impactful nonetheless. Being the daughter of substance-dependent parents caused me to live through a number of traumatic life experiences at a young age. The memories of getting lost in dark alleys and exhausting late-night cab rides just for my parents to get their fix are all still with me – along with the countless days of missed school to provide clean urine in order to protect my mom and dad from the consequences of their own actions.

At age ten my parents’ rights were terminated. While I was lucky enough to be placed in kinship care and eventually legally adopted, my pain and trauma did not end – it was only suppressed until later in life, when I enrolled in college. Attending college was a dream come true, but it also became a nightmare, when common college life experiences brought flashbacks of my past. The exposure to binge drinking, college parties, drugs, and the sense of responsibility for those around me were all too familiar.

It was in these challenging moments that I had to make decisions about who I was and how my story would shape me. This process was necessary in my personal growth, but also led me to experience some of the hardest days of my life. All my life I was constantly aware of feeling different compared to those around me. Even when surrounded by my family and friends, I continued to question why I was the way I was. I mostly found comfort and answers through my biological grandmother, Norma, who passed away in March of my junior year in college.

The truth is it took my entire college career to process my trauma and learn how to cope with my symptoms of emotional instability. Counseling was prohibitively expensive for me and my family, which made treatment unattainable. Yet, from the day I was adopted until now, I knew how much I desperately needed it to heal and live an overall healthy life – so I took matters into my own hands. This self-directed healing process caused me great amounts of stress and anxiety, and much of the time left me to feel lost and discouraged to pick myself back up again. Even today, I have bad days and the only tools I have to cope with are from what I taught myself. I had to learn how to become resilient, but the consequences of my unaddressed trauma follow me through every stage of life due to the lack of support and intervention from the child welfare system.

The Problem

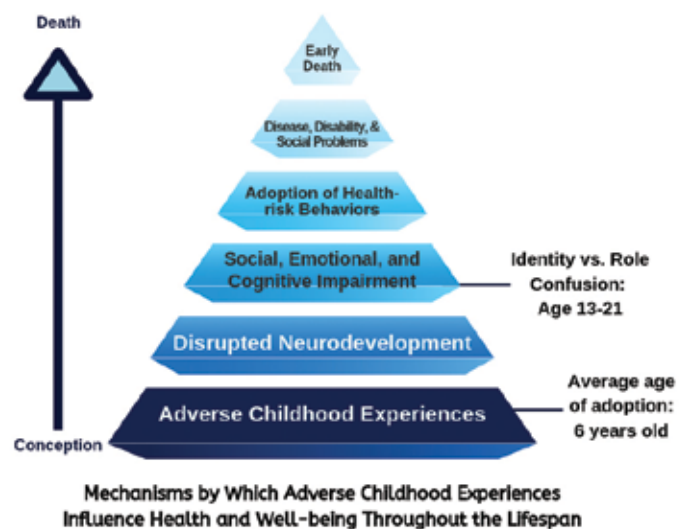
While permanency is a goal of the child welfare system, it is not the only goal. The child welfare system strives to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being for all children that come into care. Yet our system is cutting children off from the supports necessary to ensure positive life outcomes for those who are adopted and exit the foster care system.

At least 90 percent of children in foster care experience trauma (Smith, 2014) and a significant number of children being adopted have needs beyond that of finding a stable home or family. Common experiences

for children entering and living through the foster care system include: adverse prenatal conditions, early deprivation and neglect, physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, exposure to violence, multiple placements, interrupted attachments and traumatic grief (Smith, 2014).

Some of these experiences are considered Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are ten key traumatic experiences an individual can have in childhood that are linked to long-term mental and physical health consequences. While having any number of ACEs can put you at risk, having four or more ACEs is the threshold at which people become highly likely to experience severe long-term social and emotional consequences, cognitive impairment, and even premature death (Brown et al., 2009). The average number of ACEs for foster youth is 3.6, and over half of foster youth reported ACEs of four or more (Kerker et al., 2015; Sacks & Murphey, 2018). Foster youth typically have a higher number of ACEs than average Americans because of the traumatic experiences that brought them into care (Kerker et al., 2015).

Aside from the trauma young people in foster care have experienced, all youth experience a process called identity formation. This process begins during childhood and continues into adolescence as young people



try to make sense of their direction and purpose in life (Heath, 2012). For youth who have experienced foster care, including those who achieve permanency, this identity formation process can be extremely challenging. When people form their identity, they rely on coherent stories to create and share in order to understand the meaning of their lives and to link their identity to their past, present, and future (McAdams, 2001). An individual's relationship with their race, gender, and adoption journey also plays an extraordinary role in identity development (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). This can be a difficult and draining task for foster youth, who may have never received closure from their biological family and can find it difficult to come to terms with their experiences or to accept their current situation.

Current Law

The federal government has recognized the mental health needs of youth in foster care and established some limited post-permanency supports for young people who exit foster care through adoption. Unfortunately, mental health supports and resources are not available to young people in foster care once they become adopted – even though their mental health needs continue beyond permanency.

The Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program within *Title IV-B of the Social Security Act* outlines the requirements states must meet in terms of the services offered to foster youth, those at-risk of entering foster care, and adopted youth and their families. This program outlines four categories that states should meet: (1) family support services, (2) family preservation services, (3) time-limited reunification services, and (4) adoption promotion and support services. Adoption promotion and support services are defined as “services and activities designed to encourage more adoptions out of the foster care system, when adoptions promote the best interests of children, including such activities as: pre- and post-adoptive services and activities designed to expedite the adoption process and support adoptive families” (42 U.S.C. § 421-429). Defining adoption promotion and support services in this way means that they are considered one in the same, when they are two very different things. As a result, the focus of our national post-permanency efforts has been on activities designed to encourage adoptions out of foster care, rather than post-permanency supports to ensure the well-being of youth once they exit to permanency.

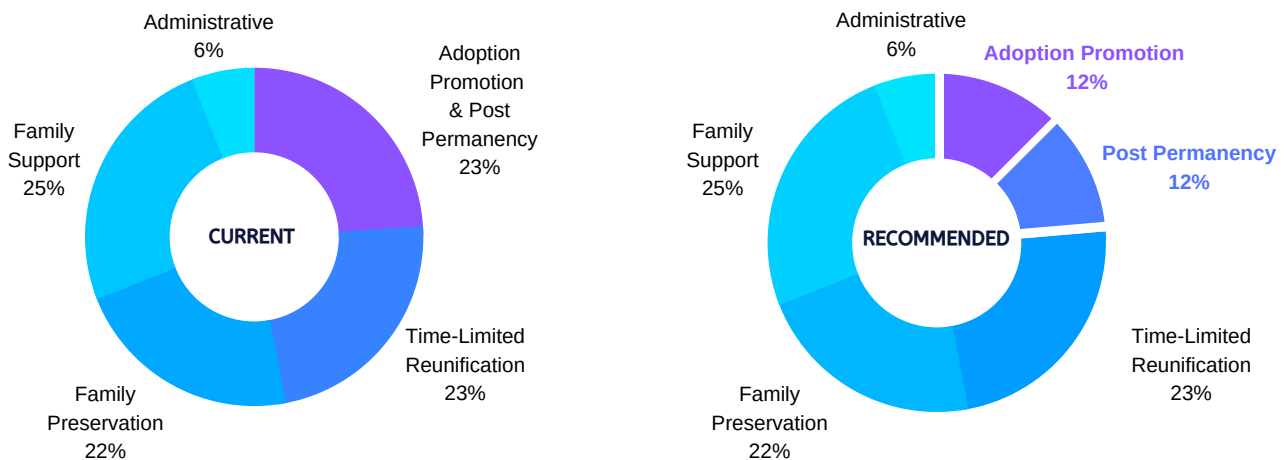
Title IV-E of the Social Security Act requires the development of a written case plan for any child receiving foster care maintenance payments under title IV-E (42 U.S.C. § 671). While states vary in how they conduct case planning, the process generally follows eight steps: referral, intake, investigation, family assessment, case plan, services provision, monitoring family and case progress, and case closure. During family assessment, information is gathered through an investigation with all parties involved to help identify the needs of the child and family, which then informs the services that will be outlined in the case plan. The final step is case closure, which is achieved when either the goals of the case plan are met, the family is no longer participating in services, and/or permanency is achieved. For this report, I am suggesting that a similar case planning process take place as a child is preparing to exit foster care to permanency, which is not currently required by federal law.

Policy Recommendations

All children who experience the child welfare system, including children who have achieved permanency through adoption, have unique challenges that must be addressed. The child welfare system is supposed to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. Congress can ensure that this goal is met by implementing the following recommendations:

- Congress should require all states to implement a final needs assessment to assess the mental and emotional well-being of all youth achieving permanency.** This needs assessment should be given to every individual exiting the foster care system each time his/her case closes. In the assessment, youth should be evaluated for their mental and emotional well-being to determine a plan of recommended service(s) to ensure a successful healing and growth process for youth beyond placement. In addition, states will also be able to benefit from this assessment, as it will be a tool to address the gap in services specific to their population.
- Congress should require all states to offer emotional support services until the age of 26, to all youth regardless of length of time in formal or informal foster care.** Congress should amend Title IV-B Subpart 2 to include more explicit requirements around post-adoption assistance programs. This should include a recommended amount of funding be allocated specifically to post-adoption assistance rather than including it within the same funding as adoption promotion. Young adults should be able to access these funds for supports and benefits until the age of 26 in order to have a respectable amount of time to heal from their trauma, learn effective coping mechanisms, and continue on living an overall healthy life.

Current vs. Recommended Funding Distribution



Policy Report No. 5

A 21st Century Social Contract: Guaranteeing a Better Life for Children with Disabilities in Foster Care

David Samuel Hall

Executive Summary

The difficulties experienced by the average child in foster care are far worse for a child who has a disability due to a higher level of need, fewer supports, and minimal compliance requirements (Lightfoot & LaLiberte, 2011). When a culture of compliance only requires *documentation* instead of the *provision of appropriate, high-quality services*, the nation will simply perpetuate a system that continues to fail its youth. Policymakers need to ensure that every child who is impacted by a child welfare intervention is guaranteed an improved quality of life before they leave care, no matter their ability or where and how they receive the intervention. Congress can do this by proactively addressing the disproportionality of young people with disabilities in residential care, providing and enforcing Individualized Care Plans (ICP), and mandating that public agencies only use federal dollars for high quality services and providers.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Mandate that any child in foster care with a disability be given an Individualized Care Plan (ICP) to inform appropriate placement decisions and improve their well-being and quality of life in care.
- Direct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish a national clearinghouse of family training curricula and best practices to care for and work with children with disabilities.
- Prohibit federal Title IV-E foster care funding from being used to fund congregate care facilities with any substantiated cases of institutional abuse or neglect, not demonstrating a track record of ensuring child safety.
- Require states to use and report on “reasonable efforts” to ensure continuity of services for youth with disabilities who are aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adult service systems.

Personal Reflection

During my first experience in care at eight years old, I was placed in seven different inpatient facilities over one 6-month period. I received poor counseling, was overmedicated, and I actively manipulated undertrained staff into giving me sedatives just so I could skip classes. During this period, my mom and my grandparents were not informed about my placement changes, and our communication was cut off. This all culminated in my being retraumatized in a congregate care facility, where I was thrown into a room in the teen ward. I was locked in a room with a cement floor, a drain in the middle for a bathroom, and glass walls. This allowed the staff to monitor me, but it also robbed me of my privacy and every ounce of my dignity. Ten years later, after having been retraumatized by the place that was supposed to keep me safe, this facility finally



faced legal penalties based on reports collected from more than 30 other victims (Tulsa World, 2017). I had been abandoned in a place with a clear history of atrocities that remains open and funded to this day.

Throughout this time, everything about my experience suggested that my child welfare agency was not working in my best interests to improve my life, but it was instead more concerned about its own institutional interests. I had capable relatives who loved me and were willing to care for me, but the agency instead chose to take me away from them simply because they feared liability when I had a tantrum, a completely normal response for an abused 8-year-old with PTSD. After failing to equip my family for success and removing me from their home when things became inconvenient for the agency, I was placed in a facility with untrained staff who continue to maintain a reputation to this day for abusing and preying on children. While I was fortunate not to have a disability to add to the challenges I faced in care, it is clear that children with a need for higher levels of specialized care run the risk of experiencing even greater hardship.

When child welfare agencies prioritize checking the box on compliance over a child's well-being. The most vulnerable are left to fend for themselves and their most basic needs, especially when they lack the functional capability to do so. And yet, this culture of compliance persists in so many of today's child welfare systems. Often, it impacts eligibility limits for federal funding that supports child welfare. For example, I recently had a conversation with one of our state's largest independent living providers about how they are providing services to a girl with an IQ of 87 who will turn 18 this summer and is at imminent risk of homelessness. Despite this knowledge, the publicly-funded child welfare agency is refusing to provide her access to housing, paraprofessionals, employment coaches, and other people and programs that would reduce her risk of homelessness and bolster her potential for success. They are denying her services because the federal government will not reimburse the state for these necessary services as her IQ is classified as "too High".

The Problem and Current Law

Congress enacted legislation to create the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for children with the highest needs in an educational setting. The IEP brings together an interdisciplinary team of the child, teachers, administrators, parents, paraprofessionals, and others with a focus on well-being and maintaining the least restrictive learning environment possible. In addition, federal funding is tied to outcomes and compliance. Yet, there is currently no statutory requirement for a similar construct to be applied to this same population when they are in foster care. Congress needs to change this. Grounded in the Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP) requirements of the *Family First Prevention Services Act* and consistent with the requirement for a transition plan for youth aging out of care, Congress can ensure agencies and providers are held accountable for improving the quality of life for children in care by requiring that any child who has a diagnosed disability is provided with an ICP. The ICP would be developed by an interdisciplinary team which consists of the child, the child's caseworker, the court, a staff member or psychiatrist from the facility in which they reside, a disability specialist, resource parents and biological parents, and other public agency representatives as appropriate. Like IEPs, the ICP would require that children be placed in the least restrictive environment based strictly on their assessed needs, not just on what services and settings may be available. Children's ICPs should also be regularly reviewed by the federal government to ensure that children are only in the most appropriate settings, preferably with their families and communities.

Across all states, there are vast differences in the quality and duration of foster parent training programs. If current foster parents were properly trained, far fewer children would need to be placed in congregate care to get the treatment and supports they need. It is not simply a matter of the quantity of foster parents, but a matter of equipping existing foster families to better serve children with disabilities. It is counterintuitive that there are 20-year veteran foster parents who have accrued 800 or more hours of training, but have only undergone only 40 hours of specialized training, none of which is focused on caring for children with disabilities (“MAPP Training”, 2019). Because so few families are equipped to care for children with complex needs, there is a serious lack of appropriate placement options, and children with disabilities are overrepresented in congregate care and left in institutional settings longer and farther away from home than other children (Children’s Bureau, 2015).

By providing a robust array of foster parents who are ready and willing to care for kids who have higher level needs, child welfare leaders can ensure the best interests of children along with the best possible family placement options. The District of Columbia is setting the example for others by working to build such a robust placement array and ensure the best placement for each child is the first placement. The District’s training academy will roll out an online training brochure and assign nurses to children with more severe medical, mental, or developmental needs, with the goal of Training all parents as therapeutic foster homes. The agency will also require that all workers also participate in any foster parent trainings.

The intended outcomes of this initiative refocus agency resources from traditional recruitment models to ongoing training, support, and retention of foster parents. Congress can act on this model by requiring child welfare systems to address the root cause of distress among foster parents. Namely, foster parents rarely complain that workers are not responsive; more often, they are upset that caseworkers lack the knowledge and resources to help them properly support the child in their care. Congress should require that every child welfare agency offer trainings to equip families to identify and care for a child with a disability and to ensure that all families are brought to the level of competency required for therapeutic certification in their state. Additionally, any parent who requests a training for their child’s disability that is not readily available must be provided a meaningful training in the home with the child by a disability professional so the family can stay together. The federal government must support this effort by providing readily available evidence-based curricula so parents have the tools to maintain a strong and thriving family.

Warehousing those children who have the most complex needs in institutions that provide minimal supports and often subject them to abuse is unacceptable. Yet, there are congregate facilities throughout the country, many of which resemble run down prisons or orphanages in underdeveloped countries, that continue to receive millions of federal tax dollars. These institutions serve children who are removed from their parents for their own safety and placed into a system that further traumatizes them. Just as the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) mandates that no person with disabilities shall be denied services by public agencies, Congress should view poor outcomes for children with disabilities in congregate care with the same lens. The government must provide for their safety while in care and after they age out by having a zero tolerance policy

for especially egregious actions that result in instances of abuse or neglect. No state agency should be able to use federal tax dollars to pay a provider who claims on paper that they care for children with higher needs, but, in reality, either denies them admission or abandons a child who is legally eligible for services. Nor should any state agency be allowed to use federal tax dollars to pay a provider that commits any abuse or neglect against a child in its care. Congress must establish a financial consequence for any violations of these prohibited actions.

Lastly, using the data collected by the National Youth in Transition Database, state agencies that waste tax dollars and allow a child with an ICP to later become homeless must be penalized. If these zero tolerance policies are not enforced and federal penalties imposed, abuse will continue, children will never have the opportunity to be successful, and many will continue to become homeless after leaving care (NYTD, 2). Children should not have to suffer from abuse and neglect and publicly-funded mediocrity.

Policy Recommendations

- **Mandate that any child in foster care with a disability be given an Individualized Care Plan (ICP) to inform appropriate placement decisions and improve their well-being and quality of life in care.** Modeling after the IEP, Congress must report on and ensure that interdisciplinary teams protect the best interests of the child by committing to the least restrictive environment by assessment, developing well-being Standards, and appropriate “tracks” for youth on an ICP. Federal funds should be discontinued for youth on an ICP if youth do not achieve gainful and meaningful improvement to their well-being.
- **Direct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish a national clearinghouse of family training curricula and best practices to care for and work with children with disabilities.** We must equip families with the tools that provide a large and qualified pool of appropriate foster families for children with disabilities is essential to keeping kids with families and out of institutions.
- **Prohibit federal IV-E foster care funding from being used to fund congregate care facilities with any substantiated cases of institutional abuse or neglect and without a demonstrated track record of ensuring child safety.** We must hold states to a zero tolerance policy for substantiated abuse and neglect in congregate care and for denying or abandoning children who would otherwise be considered eligible for services. The government should either discontinue reimbursement of federal foster care funding or levy fines on the child welfare agency and responsible institutions.
- **Require states to use and report on “reasonable efforts” to ensure continuity of services for youth with disabilities who are aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adult service systems.** Congress should extend federal foster care funding for all foster youth with disabilities until the age of 26 and explicitly prohibit states from denying services to youth who are or were on an ICP. In addition, Congress should discontinue federal funds and levy fines in those instances when youth with an ICP become homeless and the agency failed to act.

Policy Report No. 6

Increasing Financial Security for Foster Youth Aging Out of Care

Sheree Hickman

Executive Summary

Each year, more than 28,000 youth age out of foster care across the United States, bringing with them the risks of unemployment, medical challenges, and homelessness (“Aging out”, n.d.). Many also face a host of financial challenges due to a lack of financial literacy and supports. Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) have been brought to the forefront as a model that combines financial literacy with a match savings account. With less than three percent of foster youth graduating from a four-year college (Sarubbi, Parker and Sponsler, 2016), evidence has shown a strong association between financial assets and educational attainment (Elliot, 2013). IDAs can provide a structured and supported pathway for foster youth to become financially secure and independent

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Require states to designate at least 10% of their John H. Chafee Independence Program (Chafee) funding for programs that help youth transitioning out of care become financially stable and independent.
- Increase funding for the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) program and allow ETV-eligible youth participating in education-based IDA programs to place up to \$1000 of their vouchers into their accounts.
- Develop a tax credit to incentivize individuals, nonprofits, and corporations to fund IDAs for foster youth.

Personal Reflections

As a former foster youth, one of the most common questions people ask me is “how did you get to be where you are today?” For many foster youth like me who are constantly transitioning from one place to another, we tend to put faith in something outside of our immediate environment— a passion, a mentor, a friend. For me, it was my education. It was the only part of my life in which I knew I could place my hope. It wasn’t until I graduated from college that I felt that this hope had become a reality. When I received my letter of acceptance into my dream school to pursue two master’s degrees - one in Social Work and another in Social Policy, I thought to myself: “All of my perseverance has led to this very moment.”

But then the seizures began. I was working at a non-profit in Saint Louis the summer right before my graduate program and went from one urgent care to another to try to pinpoint exactly what was going on. Each medical visit was followed up with statements I was unable to pay, emails from billing offices, and calls from assertive debt collectors. It was a wakeup call to reality: my success in overcoming the foster care system did not measure up to the thousands of dollars I owed in unpaid bills.

At the time, only 14 states had expanded Medicaid to include out-of-state former foster youth, and Missouri was not one of them (Health-Care Coverage, 2015). When I left California to pursue my graduate education, I couldn't bring my health insurance with me. My medical coverage wasn't portable until recently when Congress passed the *Support for Families and Communities Act* that made Medicaid coverage universal for foster youth until age 26 even after moving away from their state of origin (P.L 115-271, 2018). With foster youth making up only a small part of the population but accounting for significant costs in behavioral and medical care (Health-Care Coverage, 2015) the change was a critical step in helping youth transition from care successfully.

No matter what their circumstances, youth are at risk of incurring significant debt once they age out of foster care – a problem I learned firsthand. Now at age 23, the lack of financial resources has hit me harder than ever before. Although California provided financial training to foster youth through their independent living program, the instruction was inadequate and failed to prepare me for real-world situations. With rising child welfare caseloads across the United States (“Aging out”, n.d.) and the costs of education continuing to increase, there has never been a better time to ensure young people in foster care have the skills and resources they need to be financially independent.

The Problem and Current Law

Each year, thousands of foster youth age out of care with one hope: to have a smooth transition into adulthood. In reality, they face high risks of homelessness, unemployment, lack of education, and mental and physical health issues, so financial security can be a huge challenge (Pergamit and Johnson, 2009; Pergamit, McDaniel and Hawkins, 2012). Unlike other youth, those that have aged out of foster care may be unable to rely on parents or have the adequate financial training to address these challenges themselves. (Courtney et al., 2007; Edelstein and Lowenstein, 2014). Additionally, children in foster care often make little to no earnings and may not fully grasp the importance of savings before they age out (Peters, Sherraden and Kuchiniski, 2012b; Edelstein and Lowenstein, 2014). A survey found that at age 21, two-fifths of former foster youth had outstanding debt besides education expenses, home or auto loans, and only half reported having a bank account (Courtney et al., 2007). The lack of financial well-being adds to already existing stress and uncertainty young people face in transitioning from care.

These financial challenges also have an impact on their educational outcomes. Although almost all youth in foster care say they want to attend and graduate from college (Courtney, 2016), just four percent of foster youth graduate from a four-year college by age 26, compared to 50 percent of young people who did not experience foster care (Courtney, 2011). Among former foster youth who do not attend college, 40 percent said it was because they did not have enough money to pay for school, and 20 percent said they needed to work full-time (Courtney, 2011).

The federal government has taken significant steps to support youth aging out of foster care through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Created in 1999, the program supports youth ages 14-23 with services to support educational attainment and career preparation, while it helps to build key

life skills to achieve independent living (ACF, n.d.). Colorado, for example, requires budgeting and financial literacy training for all of their foster youth beginning at age 14, while Maryland uses this opportunity to provide every child in care with free credit consultation and a discussion on the purpose of a credit report, as well as steps to maintain a clear credit history (Fryar, Jordan and DeVooght, 2017).

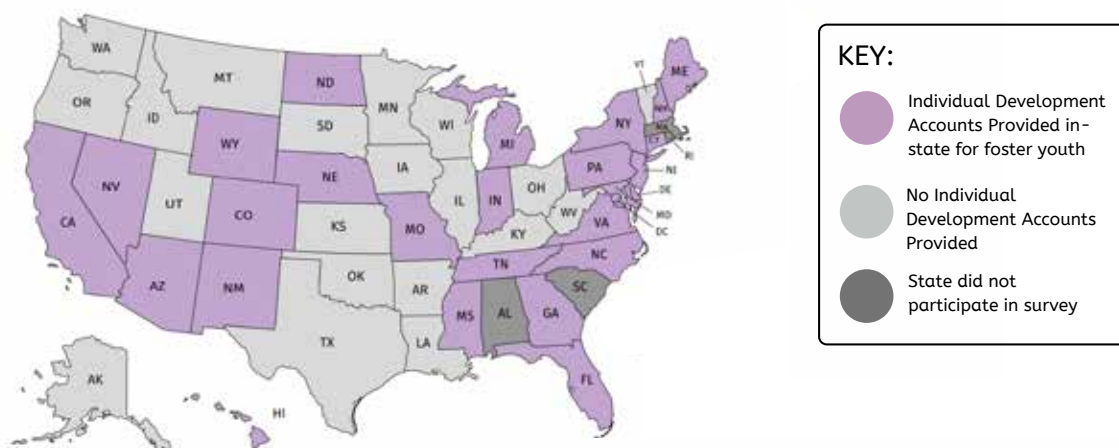
Congress also established the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) program, a separate source of funding that provides \$60 million in state grants to support youth aging out of care to pursue higher education. ETVs provide vouchers up to \$5,000 a year for the cost of attendance for youth ages 14 to 21 (and in some states, up to 23) to attend an institution of higher education for up to five years (Nixon, et al., 2007). While this support is critical, it is still insufficient because the financial pressures on foster youth who attend higher education go well beyond tuition.

Over the past several years, the field has been experimenting with innovative strategies to support young adults aging out of foster care through a specific financial capacity model known as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs). IDAs are a tool built on savings and investments to help children and families secure financial stability, economic opportunities and educational attainment. The accounts are “seeded” with an initial deposit that grows over time, and withdrawals from the accounts are generally matched at a 1:1 ratio to purchase an approved asset (Peters, Sherraden and Kuchinski, 2012). Though approved purchases vary from program to program, monies for foster youth are generally restricted for funding higher education, a vehicle, housing, emergency expenses, and other similar approved purchases (Peters et al. 2012; (“Building financial”, 2014).

The Opportunity Passport®, sponsored by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative is the most prominent IDA model that communities have adopted for their foster youth. Like many asset saving accounts, Opportunity Passport® provides financial literacy training, an account at a financial institution, and a 1:1 match for asset purchases up to \$1,000 per year (Opportunity Passport, 2015). Funds are geared towards education, transportation, housing, and health care. The program has benefited over 7,000 foster youth and has shown impressive results. Thirty-five percent of participants withdrew matched savings, with the most common asset purchased being a vehicle to provide easier access to work and school, followed by housing and education costs (Opportunity Passport, 2015). After making the first purchase, almost half of participants stayed in the program to save for another purchase (Opportunity Passport, 2015).

At the federal and state level, IDAs for children and families have been funded through *The Assets for Independence Act*, a program that passed as part of the *Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services Act of 1998* (P.L. 105-285) (AFI, n.d.). Since then, TANF and Chafee have become the primary sources of government funding for IDA programs, especially for foster youth jurisdictions in over 20 states have built IDA programs foster youth and have seen significant results in terms of savings, budget management, and financial literacy. (Fryar et al, 2017).

Individual Development Accounts (IDA) Programs for Foster Youth



Created June 21, 2019 | Data Source: Child Trends, Supporting Young People Transitioning from Foster Care: Findings from a National Survey, November 2017

Policy Recommendations

Federal policy can do more to promote financial capability and savings for young people who age out of foster care through the following recommendations:

- Require states to designate at least 10% of their Chafee funding for programs that help youth transitioning out of care become financially stable and independent.** Foster youth need more financial support than they are currently receiving to help mitigate financial risk. Designated funding from Chafee would ensure that more states will prioritize programming to support financial stability in older youth. Additional supports should include financial management practice and assistance accessing financial products, such as a bank account and individualized budgets.
- Increase funding for the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) program and allow ETV-eligible youth participating in education-based IDA programs to place up to \$1,000 of their vouchers into their accounts.** In 2018, the Education and Training Voucher Program was amended under the *Family First Prevention Services Act* to extended eligibility to those who “experience foster care at age 14 and older” without allocating additional funding to cover all who are eligible (Foster Care Independence Act of 1999). Additionally, research shows that ETV’s can be more effective if they support expenses not directly relating to tuition and fees (Nixon et al., 2007). Increasing funding for the Education and Training Voucher Program and placing a portion into IDA’s can give youth flexible funding to pay for additional fees such as transportation, emergencies, and general living expenses.
- Develop a tax credit to incentivize individuals, nonprofits, and corporations to fund IDAs for foster youth.** For more than ten years, Oregon has been on the forefront of this innovative strategy by funding their statewide IDA program through the Oregon IDA tax credit. Oregon contributors to the IDA program, which is not limited to youth who have experienced foster care, may receive up to a 70 percent tax credit for every \$1 donated (“Learn about”, n.d.). Oregon’s IDA program has seen significant results, with more than \$37 million in matched funding being distributed to over 7,000 participants to invest in higher education, microenterprises, and homeownership (“Learn about”, n.d.). Incentivizing individuals and corporations to donate to IDA programs through a tax-credit can supplement government funding and create a more reliable and substantive funding source for IDAs for foster youth.

Policy Report No. 7

Expanding Financial Supports for Foster Youth in College

Mackenzie McGeehan

Executive Summary

Foster youth aspire to graduate college just as their peers do. However, the rate of foster youth graduating from higher education programs in the United States is only between three and 10.8 percent, while the overall bachelor's degree completion rate is 32.5 percent for the general population (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2018). This discrepancy can be attributed to a lack of financial support, insufficient education about college finances, and the difficulty of proving independent student status. Congress can help bridge these gaps by expanding supports for post-secondary students who have experienced the foster care system.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should authorize funding for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to extend financial assistance for current and former foster youth in higher education programs from 23 to 26 years of age, as ETVs are often not enough to cover non-tuition expenses.
- As a requirement of receiving Title IV-E funding, states should be required to provide educational workshops outlining the extensive process of applying to and financing college, including information about the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the availability of loans, and tutoring services for youth who have experienced the foster care system.
- Congress should streamline the process higher education institutions use to verify independent student status for financial aid by allowing a wider variety of sources to be used for verification purposes.

Personal Reflection

I entered the foster care system at age 14 after my mother committed suicide following a long battle with mental illness. Even before I entered foster care, my heart was set on attending college and creating a better way of life than the one I had. Despite my intelligence and determination, I knew that my odds of making it to college were low because my family lived far below the poverty line and had limited resources to finance an education. When I entered foster care, the odds of obtaining a college degree seemed even more slim. When it came time to apply to college, I did not have the money for the expensive application process. Fortunately, my county's Children and Youth Services had an Independent Living Program (ILP) that helped me tremendously. The program was designed to help prepare foster youth for independence by providing support related to budgeting, employment, and housing. Although I officially exited foster care the same day that I moved into my freshman dorm, the program continued to provide me with assistance for miscellaneous expenses such as my phone bill, food, and toiletries, through a monthly college stipend until I turned 21. During my senior year, when I needed the most help with graduate and law school applications, I was able to cover these additional expenses by working a third job during the summer. Unfortunately, not everyone has this luxury.

I participated in a mentoring program at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania that worked with at-risk youth, most of whom were in foster care. The Luzerne County Juvenile Justice Mentoring Program allowed me to connect with others in foster care as both a mentor and a role model. These youth felt comfortable sharing a number of their experiences with me, along with their aspirations and goals. Quite a few of my mentees expressed their interest in attending college as well as their fears of failing out. Most of their worries fell into three categories: lack of financial support, lack of emotional support, and the inability to keep up with their fellow students. My mentees have driven my desire to help more foster youth achieve their goal of obtaining training or education past their high school diploma. My position and success throughout college allowed me to help those who do not have the same opportunity to ask for help.

The Problem

In addition to the responsibilities of being a college student, foster youth in higher education experience unique challenges, including having to prove they are independent students in order to receive certain tuition assistance and loans when they have no one to co-sign for them. In addition, youth in foster care often bounce around from home to home, and as a result, change schools multiple times. These placement disruptions have a huge impact on educational outcomes. Data show that the odds of foster youth graduating from college are 3.7 times higher for foster youth who experience six or fewer school changes compared to those who experience ten or more school changes (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2018). This lack of consistency necessitates a greater need for learning support and tutoring services for foster youth to address these serious gaps.

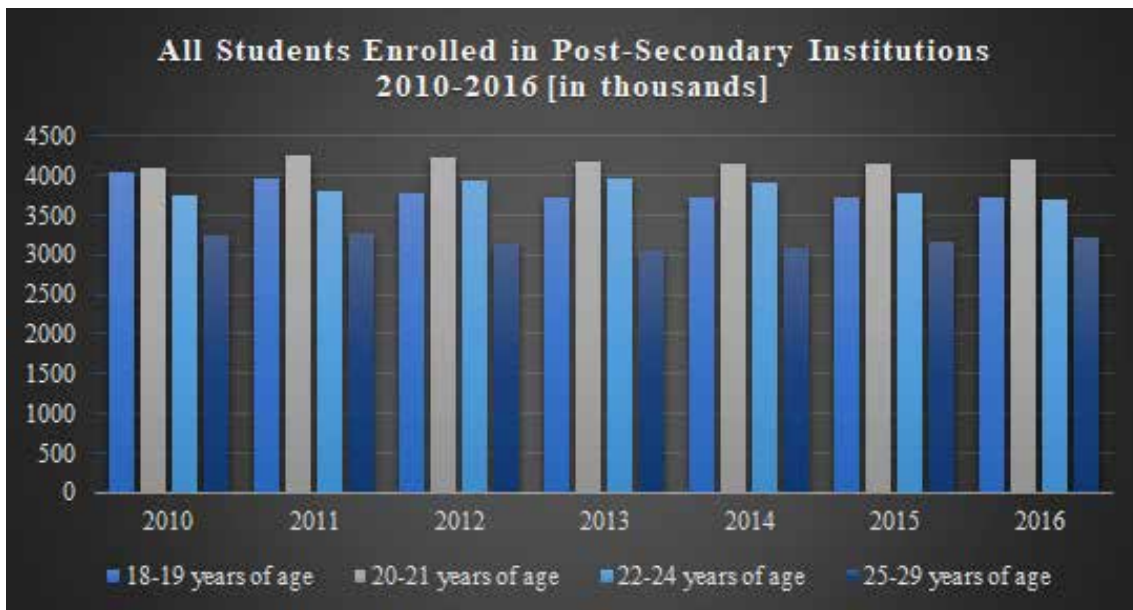
A focus on additional learning supports also limits the amount of time college students have to work while attending classes. Most students do not have the time or stamina to work a full-time job while keeping up with a full class load. The Legal Center for Foster Care & Education cites a case study in which 329 foster care alumni who received scholarships for college from the Casey Family Scholarship Program were examined to pinpoint predictors of higher education retention. Two factors were especially related to graduation and retention rates for those with backgrounds in the foster care system: independent living stability and tangible support (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2018). These tangible supports can take the form of financial support to help them get through the month, support from a person to help them navigate the FAFSA process, or assistance in proving to their college's financial aid office that they are an independent scholar. Students are already stressed enough without wondering whether or not they will be able to afford next month's phone, buy deodorant, and navigate even more serious complexities of the foster care experience.

Current Law

Congress has recognized the need to support foster youth transitioning to independence since 1985, when the *Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act* authorized funding for the Independent Living Program to help older youth in foster care transition to independence. Many of the services offered by the Independent Living Programs include, but are not limited to, academic support, post-secondary educational support, career preparation, and educational financial assistance. Independent Living Programs also offer monetary assistance to foster youth in college or training programs in the form of college stipends. However, this monetary support

ends when foster youth reach the age in which they must leave care. While this age varies by state, only 25 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation to extend foster care past the age of 18 (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2018).

The *Family First Prevention Services Act in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018* (P.L.115-123) made improvements to the Chafee program to extend the program’s eligibility to former foster youth up to 23 years of age. While the extension of Chafee resources until the age of 23 helps, for those foster youth declared as independent students, it does not do enough. In 2018, there were approximately 12.3 million college students under the age of 25 and approximately 7.6 million college students over the age of 25 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). From 2010-2016, the number of college students between the ages of 25 and 29 has remained steadily over 3.5 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).



Citation: National Center for Educational Statistics. (2018, April). Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Attendance Status, Sex, and Age: Selected Years, 1970 through 2027. Retrieved from National Center for Educational Statistics: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_303.40.asp

In addition, there are a number of requirements that a foster youth must meet before being considered for Chafee services or the Education Training Voucher (ETV) program which can limit the number of young people who benefit from these programs (Foster Care to Success, 2019). Even then, youth rarely see this money, because it often goes straight to their institutions to pay for tuition. Foster youth need an additional source of supplemental income for their everyday needs and bills. Having that extra financial safety net and added educational support could potentially be the difference between a mental breakdown and a successful semester. Additional funds have the potential to not only help normalize the life of current and former foster youth in college, but to increase foster youth graduation rates.

Recommendations

- **Congress should authorize funding for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to extend financial assistance for current and former foster youth in higher education programs from 23 to 26 years of age, as ETVs are often not enough to cover non-tuition expenses.** The Independent Living Program allowed me to pursue my dreams of attending a four-year college and earning my bachelor's degree by helping to supplement my income during a portion of my college experience. Over 7.5 million college students were over the age of 25 in 2018. That number alone shows that support until the age of 23 is an important step forward, but that there needs to be a policy leap to help all the young people who need it. If this financial support beyond tuition assistance could help foster youth through their entire undergraduate program or until they complete their undergraduate degree (up to the age of 26), their chances of graduation will increase. While tuition assistance is still necessary for foster youth, especially due to their general lack of having a cosigner for loans, college students worry about more than just tuition. The inability to pay for monthly bills and basic necessities is a genuine concern for students. For those foster youth who must decide between a job or studying to keep up with their course load, the concern is even more acute.
- **As a requirement of receiving Title IV-E funding, states should be required to provide educational workshops outlining the extensive process of applying to and financing college, including information about the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the availability of loans, and tutoring services for youth who have experienced the foster care system.** Foster youth in college do not have the same support system as their peers or similar opportunities to learn about the college application process and various financing options. Educational workshops on how the collegiate financial aid process works would be extremely helpful for those foster youth who do not have a family or caseworker ready to explain the lengthy process to them one-on-one. This critical addition to their programming would allow more foster youth to better understand what is involved in applying for, attending and financing college – and why it is worth the effort.
- **Congress should streamline the process higher education institutions use to verify independent student status for financial aid by allowing a wider variety of sources to be used for verification purposes.** The verification process that allows independent students to receive financial aid is much more difficult than necessary. Students often need to get written proof and court orders to prove their status as an orphan or ward of the state, a process that may take months. A more streamlined process would allow foster youth to more easily access federal financial assistance for higher education. This is a recognized problem nationwide. To address this problem, U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) recently introduced the *Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act (S. 789)* which should be passed immediately by Congress. The bill contains a provision that would streamline the verification process for independent students and simplify the verification process for foster youth, allowing documented phone calls, written statements, or verifiable electronic data from a variety of specified sources to verify a foster youth's independent status.

Policy Report No. 8

Ensuring All Children in Foster Care Find Loving Homes to Call Their Own

Alexander Oleson

Executive Summary

I credit my success today to my adoptive family, who provided me with a stable, supportive home that has shaped me in unimaginable ways. I want all children in foster care to have the same experience. Although my parents are incredible, they and other foster and adoptive parents still need resources and supports to be successful. The federal government can help more children in foster care find permanent, loving homes, as I did, by eliminating financial barriers for adoptive parents, using evidence-based models to recruit parents, and improving our national data collection of post-permanency outcomes.

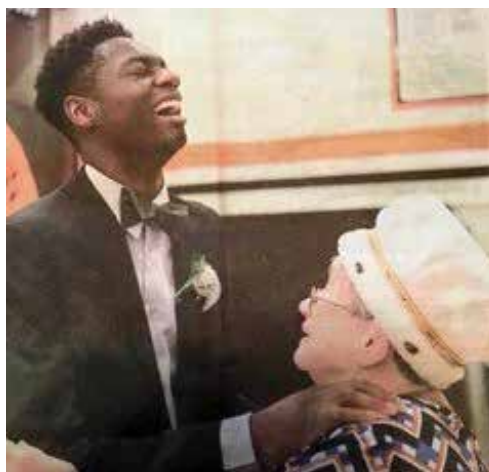
Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Allow states to implement evidence-based recruitment models to improve permanency outcomes.
- Commission a national survey to gather qualitative data on a range of post-permanency needs, challenges and outcomes.
- Eliminate one of the financial barriers to adoption from foster care by making the adoption tax credit fully refundable.

Personal Reflection

I entered foster care as a baby when my birth family was not able to take care of me due to my serious health concerns related to being born prematurely with underdeveloped lungs. Just after my second birthday, I was adopted by my forever family and the stability I experienced there has allowed me to thrive in school, engage in extracurricular activities, and create long-term connections with teachers and peers. Having a permanent home laid the foundation for my success.

My parents are outstanding people: for more than 40 years, they have fostered over 120 children and adopted seven children. They recognize the potential in every single young person who comes to our home. I have seen in my own house the power of family to heal young people who have experienced so much pain. Yet my mom has always said that adoption would not have been possible without some financial support. My parents aren't wealthy, so my mother



After I was crowned Homecoming King, “I started crying because I realized I wouldn’t be who I am without my adopted mom. She is one of the few things I cherish most on this planet. Seeing all my friends was great but sharing that with her was really special.” Photo by Brooklyn Roth

sought out resources that benefitted our wellbeing, such as tuition assistance, financial assistance, athletics, and extracurricular activities. Supports like these are important for all youth in families and are especially important for families who are seeking to adopt.

Today I am in my third year as a student athlete on the Saint Louis University Division I Track and Field Team. I am so thankful for my family who decided to keep that mask on the baby 20 years ago and allowed my lungs to develop. I would not be where I am today without their love and support. My experience should not be an anomaly. We must remove the barriers that foster youth face in achieving permanency.

The Problem

In 2017, there were over 400,000 youth in the foster care system in the United States. Of that number, 69,525 young people were eligible to be adopted, having had their parental rights terminated, but were still languishing in foster care (AFCARS, 2017). This is unacceptable. No young person who enters the foster care system envisions aging out without permanent support.

Ensuring young people find timely pathways to permanency is critical, because the longer young people stay in foster care, the more likely they are to experience multiple placements and the less likely they are to become adopted. Research has identified a negative correlation between the number of placements a young person experiences and his/her likelihood of achieving permanency. According to a study by Chapin Hall, the permanency rate for youth who have not experienced any placement moves is 75 percent, but once a youth experiences between one and five moves, it drops to 56 percent. For youth who experience more than five placements, their permanency rate drops to 24 percent or lower (Chapin Hall, 2017).

Youth who do not find permanency must age out of foster care. The contrast in long-term outcomes between youth who age out of foster care and those who find permanency are striking. According to a report by Child Trends, a full “50 percent of young people age 18-21 age out of foster care, and 14 percent had an exit plan of long-term foster care” (2015). Young people who age out of foster care are 25% more likely to be incarcerated than their peers, and 40% become homeless within two to four years of aging out. By contrast, youth who are adopted into supportive loving homes are more likely to experience a range of positive outcomes into adulthood, including increased postsecondary educational attainment (Salazar, 2012), having a bank account (Greeson et al., 2010), reduced risk of homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009), and improved physical and mental health outcomes (Ahrens et al., 2008).

A number of barriers can make it difficult for foster youth to achieve permanency, including:

- Financial barriers: For my parents and many other prospective adoptive parents, financial concerns can be a significant barrier to adopting children. Despite the common perception that only wealthy families adopt, nearly 46% of children adopted from foster care live in families with incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (Crandall-Hollick, 2018).

- Time to permanent placement: For certain subgroups of young people in foster care, such as older youth and those with learning disabilities, it can be harder to find permanent placements, and as a result, they tend to remain in foster care longer.
- Lack of data: Our understanding of what works when it comes to achieving successful permanency for children in foster care is limited. Currently child welfare agencies do not gather much data or feedback from children and families, which makes it difficult to make program and practice advances to improve outcomes.

Congress has long recognized the importance of loving, permanent homes for children and helping children exit foster care quickly to permanency. In 1997, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (P.L. 105-89), which, among other things, mandated shortened timelines for achieving permanency for children in foster care and stipulated that efforts to place a child in an adoptive home or with a legal guardian “could be made concurrently” through adoption promotion and support services. These services and activities are those “designed to encourage more adoptions out of the foster care system, when adoptions promote the best interests of children, including such activities as pre- and post-adoptive services and activities designed to expedite the adoption process and support adoptive families.”

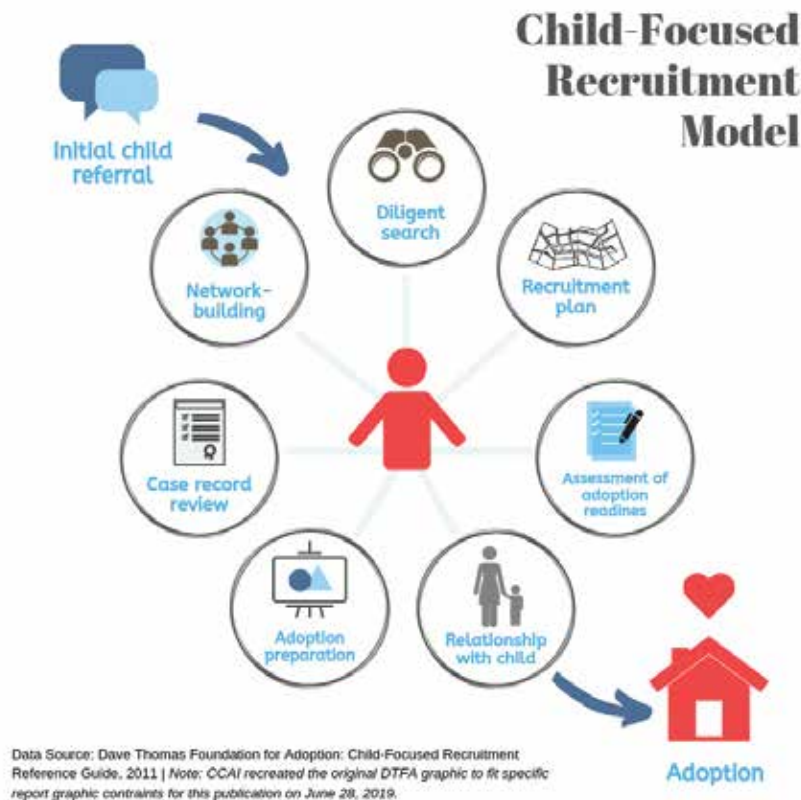
Congress has also created an adoption tax credit to provide financial assistance to adoptive families. However, this tax credit is not refundable – meaning that not all families, particularly lower- and middle-income families, can access it. Several members of Congress are working to change this, and have introduced the Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act of 2019 (S. 1652) (H.R. 2965), which would allow families to receive a tax credit for all qualifying adoption expenses up to \$13,810.

Policy Recommendations

- **Allow states to implement evidence-based recruitment models to improve permanency outcomes.** Congress should include language in the next FY2020 appropriation package to help scale evidence-based child-focused recruitment models such as Wendy’s Wonderful Kids (WWK). Developed by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, the program has demonstrated a number of positive impacts for foster youth: under the program, children are 1.7 times more likely to be adopted, with the greatest impact among older youth and youth with mental health disorders. This program is not reaching all the young people who could benefit from it. Federal funding should be allocated to scale WWK and other evidence-based models, which feature a few key elements central to their success: smaller caseloads to allow caseworkers to develop better relationships with the young people they are helping, diligent search for potential adoptive families and aggressive follow-up with identified contacts, and a clear designation of who holds responsibility for adoption preparation, along with an opportunity for that individual to meet with the child regularly to establish rapport and trust.
- **Commission a national survey to gather qualitative data on a range of post-permanency needs, challenges, and outcomes.** Congress should commission a national survey to gather more information focused on ensuring that more children can achieve successful permanency. The survey should be administered nationwide and include a representative sample of youth adopted out of foster care by age,

gender, and race/ethnicity. This survey should be constructed with qualitative questions that include young people who have gained permanency as well as their adoptive parents, guardians, or kin. It is also important to track practices that help adopted youth successfully adjust to their new family members. The questions should be asked within three months post-adoption and should occur at least three times in the first 12 months, to ensure immediate thoughts are gathered and changes in attitudes and behaviors are tracked. The questions should evaluate access to and quality of mental and physical health resources, other post-permanency supports, families' knowledge of accessible post-permanency programs and supports in their communities, and other resources.

- Eliminate one of the financial barriers to adoption from foster care by making the adoption tax credit fully refundable.** Although it is expensive to adopt a child, making the adoption tax credit fully refundable can help mitigate some of the financial burden. Several members of the U.S. Congress, including Senators Roy Blunt (MO), Bob Casey (PA), James Inhofe (OK) and Representatives Danny Davis (IL), Jackie Walorski (IN), Karen Bass (CA), and Don Bacon (NE), have introduced the Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act of 2019 (S. 1652) (H.R. 2965), which would do just that. If passed, this bill would enable more families to provide supportive homes to children and youth in foster care. Providing federal adoption financial assistance to families also benefits American taxpayers, since the modest financial assistance of the tax credit for adoption and permanency costs far less than providing long-term care in the foster care system.



Policy Report No. 9

Crossover Prevention Services: Multisystem Youth and The Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

Lino Peña-Martinez

Executive Summary

Once a young person becomes involved in either the child welfare system or juvenile justice system, it becomes much easier for them to enter the other system. Youth who become involved with both systems are known as “multisystem” youth (or “crossover” or “dual-status” youth). Although our understanding of the experiences and outcomes of these young people is murky, we do know that their outcomes are worse than those who experience foster care or juvenile justice alone. More federal attention on this issue is needed to better understand the needs of these young people, prevent multiple system involvement, and ensure that youth who are involved in multiple systems get the support they need.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

To prevent youth from becoming involved in multiple systems, and address the needs of those who are currently involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, Congress should:

- Request a report from the General Accountability Office (GAO) on multisystem youth.
- Increase funding within the currently authorized levels for the *Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP)* to allow states to improve prevention programs for multi-system youth
- Require states to include in their Title IV-E child welfare state plans information on their efforts to prevent young people in foster care from entering the juvenile justice system

Personal Reflection

I was placed in foster care at age 5, when I was living with my mother at a homeless shelter for victims of domestic violence, after her mental health reached a point of crisis through no fault of her own. I will never forget the day I was removed, when my sister and I were put in the back of a police car and sent to an orphanage. At that point in my life I knew the bad guys always went in the back of the police car. As I entered the foster care system, I felt the guilt weighing on me. What did I do wrong? Was this my fault? Does my mom not want me? The punishment did not fit the crime.

As I grew older, I often found myself getting in trouble at school, but while I struggled behaviorally, I always excelled academically. In high school, even as a 3.4+ GPA student involved in sports and student government, because I was in foster care, my normal adolescent behavior was always considered dangerous. One day at school, my friend and I were distracted in class playing with a gag toy that shocks you. Although it was no bigger than an eraser it just so happened that it was shaped like a gun. I was immediately

handcuffed outside of my classroom and left to sit in the security parlor wearing handcuffs for the remainder of the day while our school security officers flipped through a book to figure out what they could charge me with. Ultimately, I was charged with “brandishing” a replica firearm and booked at our local juvenile facility before my foster parents were even contacted. Just like that—I was a multisystem youth, and the odds were stacked against me for the rest of my life.

It was far too easy for me to become involved with the juvenile justice system. As a multisystem youth, I experienced firsthand the coordination and prevention failures of the both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems—but that did not define me. As a young person with many struggles stemming from the trauma of my childhood, it’s almost as if I was destined to become a multisystem youth.

The Problem

Although research on multisystem youth is limited, according to the research that has been done, these young people are especially vulnerable. They tend to:

- Have parents with a history of criminal justice system involvement, mental health problems, and/or substance abuse problems, or have witnessed domestic violence;
- Come from disadvantaged family backgrounds that have less stable family relationships and lower social supports than single-system youth;
- Experience academic and behavioral health challenges;
- Have a history of running away;
- Offend at a younger age (generally between 14 and 16 years old) than youth in the general delinquency population; and
- Overrepresent as children of color as compared to the general population, child welfare population, and juvenile justice population (Halemba and Siegel, 2011; Saeteurn and Swain, 2009; Herz and Ryan, 2008; Herz, 2012; Halemba et al., 2004; Kelley, Thornberry, and Smith, 1997. Douglas-Siegel et al., 2013; Vidal et al., 2018; Vidal et al., 2019; Wiig and Tuell, 2013).

Aside from these figures, our understanding of this problem is murky. No national data exists on how many kids cross over from child welfare to the juvenile justice system and vice versa. In fact, there is no consistent or uniform way to define, monitor, and track multisystem involvement (Vidal, 2018). The limited data available suggests that the prevalence of multisystem involvement varies greatly by pathways and the degree of involvement with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems (Vidal, 2018). Furthermore, services for these youth vary across the country: where one state may deliver services effectively, another might not, and the nature and degree of collaboration within and across systems also varies significantly.

The federal government has acknowledged the problem of multisystem involvement in a few ways. First, it requires state child welfare agencies to submit information about the number of transfers from the child

welfare system to the juvenile justice system in their annual Child and Family Service Plans. (45 CFR § 1355). However, states do not always provide consistent data, so these youth are not accurately accounted for, and likely, significantly undercounted (Congressional Research Service, 2009).

In addition, Title V of the *Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act* (JJDP A), as amended by the *Juvenile Justice Reform Act* (JJRA), includes some provisions aimed at preventing multisystem involvement (P.L. 115-385). However, the JJDP A has not been adequately funded: overall appropriations have fallen in recent years, despite the heavy mandates included in current law related to a range of issues impacting justice-involved youth (CRS, 2019). States simply do not have the resources they need to focus on preventing and meeting the needs of youth who cross over from the child welfare system.

These policies are insufficient. At a certain point we cannot continue to throw more systems at an issue. Given the challenges these youth face, we must start taking a more comprehensive approach to preventing multisystem involvement and meeting the needs of multisystem youth. We have to get to the root causes of the problem by focusing on prevention. Increasing our efforts to prevent multisystem involvement is critical to preventing youth from going deeper into the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

A more intentional, comprehensive focus on this population would also help identify and eliminate duplicative interventions, ineffective service deliveries across systems, and identify how the child welfare and juvenile justice systems themselves encourage youth to cross over. Although both systems are making separate but simultaneous efforts to prevent young people from becoming system involved, there are unanswered questions about whether states intentionally cross youth over to other systems to receive federal dollars.

Policy Recommendations

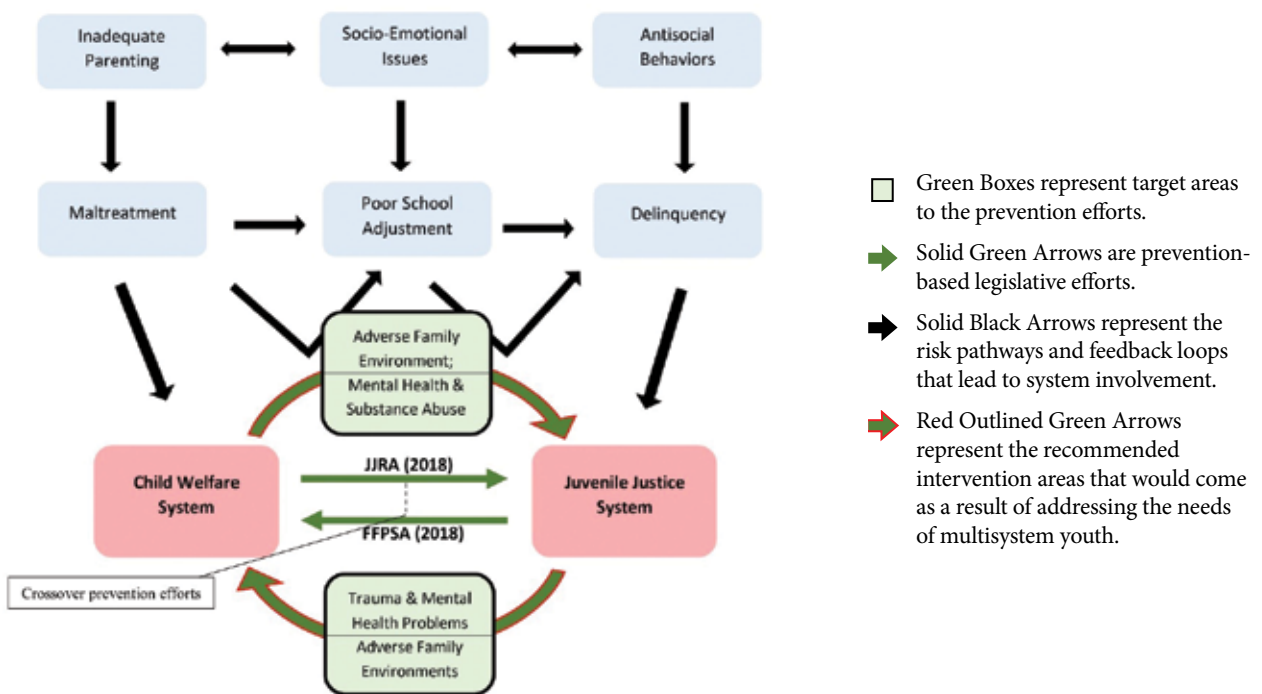
The following recommendations will promote increased coordination and blended funding opportunities between child welfare and juvenile justice systems to more effectively address the unique challenges faced by multisystem youth. Currently, most prevention efforts fall on the shoulders of state, city, and local jurisdictions. The federal government, through the recommendations below, can help states be more effective in addressing the needs of multisystem youth.

- **Congress should request a GAO report on multisystem youth.** The report should focus on understanding the scope of the issue nationally and also make recommendations about how to better monitor and provide prevention services to multisystem youth. As we develop our multisystem tracking abilities, we will be better able to identify and understand the connections between maltreatment and delinquency. This report should include comprehensive information on multisystem youth including, but not limited to: points of crossover, demographics, key characteristics, levels of system penetration, types of crime, practices leading to crossover, accountability/performance measures and practices, familial characteristics, rates of recidivism, delinquency rates, familial outcomes, exhaustive lists of existing programs addressing crossover prevention, differential treatment and racial and ethnic disparities, mental health presentations of youth, academic performance, and associated risk factors. This information will

also help give our federal and state governments the direction they need in addressing multisystem youth and implementing both the *Family First Prevention Services Act* and the *Juvenile Justice Reform Act*.

- **Increase funding within the currently authorized levels for the *Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act* (JJDPA) to allow states to improve prevention programs for multisystem youth.** They should also create a 20% set-aside for prevention programs for multisystem youth, to ensure that crossover prevention is prioritized. This funding would also promote much-needed collaboration between the juvenile justice and child welfare systems and help identify and reduce the duplication of services.
- **Congress should require states to include information on their efforts to provide prevention services for multisystem youth in their Title IV-E state plans.** Although federal law already requires Title IV-E agencies to include information about crossover youth in their state plans, this is not leading to better practices at the state level to meet the needs of these youth. Requiring child welfare agencies to include information about what they are doing to meet the needs of these youth will increase state-level attention on this population and increase accountability on this issue.

As collaboration between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems increases, our ability to track and measure service history and prevention efforts becomes more comprehensive, and we are better off as a nation. As our efforts move further upstream and we strengthen our focus on prevention efforts, accountability becomes ever more important and interagency collaboration promotes interagency accountability practices. In these efforts, we find ourselves promoting results-based accountability — we align decision making and accountability efforts between multiple systems. We continue to ask ourselves: How much did we accomplish in terms of preventing crossover between the child welfare and juvenile systems? How well did we do it? And is anyone better off as a result of our efforts?



Policy Report No. 10

Improving Post-Secondary Educational Outcomes for Kinship Care Placements & Youth who have been Adopted out of Foster Care

Christopher Scott

Executive Summary

The well-being of children who have experienced foster care must be prioritized even after they achieve permanency. Due to adversities they face as children, young people in foster care experience poor outcomes across multiple domains, including low college graduation rates. To date, most federal policy approaches to support foster youth in higher education have been limited only to youth of certain ages who have aged out of foster care. The federal government should expand the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee) to all youth who have been adopted out of foster care, regardless of age, and extend the age eligibility for Educational Training Vouchers (ETVs) utilized toward post-secondary education. These policy reforms would help to close the educational opportunity gap for all youth who have experienced foster care and alleviate some of the financial burden for adoptive and kinship homes.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Extend eligibility for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to all individuals who have been adopted from the foster care system, regardless of age.
- Expand the Educational Training Vouchers (ETV) age eligibility for youth adopted from foster care and through kinship care from 14-years-old to 18-years-old.
- Mandate that title IV-E agencies who have unspent Chafee funds report to HHS on the reasons the funds went unused.

Personal Reflection

I grew up with my biological mother in a single parent household and entered foster care at age eight after she fell into a battle with opioids and we became homeless. While I was fortunate to exit foster care to an adoptive family at 13 years old, my adoptive home had considerable instabilities. I was expected by my adoptive mom to sleep on the porch for most of middle school and was told if I reported anything to the Department of Children of Families then I would be taken away and never see my sister again, as we were adopted together. My adoption informally dissolved after I turned 18 and began living on my own.

It was during Tunxis Community College, where I couch surfed because I had nowhere to live, that I found the drive and perseverance to move forward in life. My experience in higher education was transformational. I graduated from Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) in 2017 as one of two inspirational graduates to be acknowledged in a speech at commencement. My experience inspired me to become an AmeriCorps alumni after serving as a Teach For America corps member in Connecticut for one year, and then co-founded the C.A.R.E.

Scholars program at CCSU, which supports youth who grew up in foster care, adoption, or kinship placements through their college career.

Because I had been adopted, I did not qualify for ETV, but I was fortunate to grow up in Connecticut, where I could receive adoption tuition subsidies to attend college. This changed the trajectory of my life and put me on a path to becoming the best version of myself. As a young professional, I've been able to reconnect with my adopted family and encourage them to improve their ability to parent as they raise my younger sisters.

While 70% of foster youth want to attend college (Courtney et al., 2016), only 2.7% of foster youth will receive a bachelor's degree by age 25 (Pecora, P. J. et al., 2005). I am proud to be part of the 2.7% of foster youth who have completed their bachelor's degree.

The Problem and Current Law

Youth who remain in foster care and youth who age out of foster care have access to a number of resources such as post-secondary education funding, therapeutic services, and financial support, whereas adopted youth cannot access these services. This creates perverse incentives that keep youth in the foster care system, as prospective adoptive parents may be reluctant to take on the significant financial burden of adopting a child, and young people themselves may not want to relinquish these important supports. The federal government has already acknowledged the need to support foster youth in achieving their higher education goals and is in a unique position to allow more youth to have the same opportunities that I have had to become a self-sufficient adult.

Congress has created two major programs to help young people in foster care succeed in higher education. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee) and the Educational Training Vouchers (ETV) provide federal funding to support post-secondary education and life skill development services for foster youth. While these bills are primarily targeted at youth who age out of the foster care system, Chafee supports youth who have been adopted out of foster care as well as kinship care. However, Chafee supports for youth adopted out of foster care and kinship care are restricted to youth adopted within certain age eligibility guidelines.

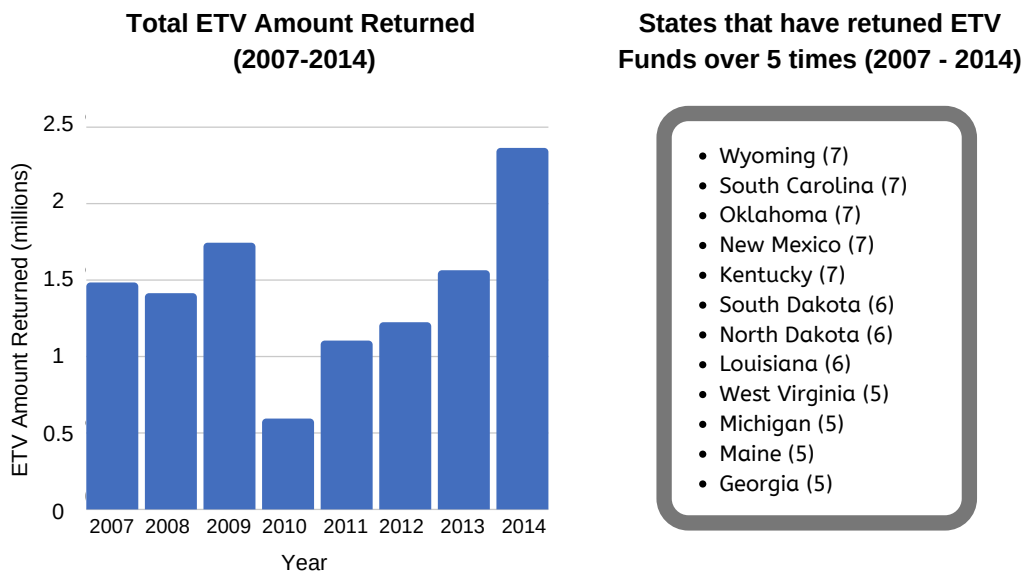
The Chafee program offers funding for independent living and life skill development services for foster youth who have aged out of the foster care system as well as youth who were adopted out of foster care or into a kinship placement between 16 and 18 years old. In 2018, the *Family First Prevention Services Act* expanded Chafee eligibility for youth adopted out of foster care and youth in kinship care to age 14. Services are not available to youth adopted out of foster care or in kinship care prior to age 14. Family First also did not expand age eligibility for the ETVs, which are an important component of Chafee. Currently, only youth who have aged out of foster care, been adopted out of foster care, or placed into kinship care between 16 and 18 years old are eligible to apply for ETVs.

Because they are not available to all youth who have experienced foster care, the Chafee and ETV programs perpetuate existing adverse conditions for youth who exit foster care to permanency. All individuals who have been adopted from foster care should have access to these services.

All youth in foster care experience serious childhood adversities, with 70% having documented incidents of maltreatment (Szilagyi, et al., 2015). These adversities translate into significant physical and mental health needs throughout their lives. While foster youth represent 3% of all enrollees in the Medicaid program, they account for 25% to 41% of all expenditures within the Medicaid program for children (Rubin et al., 2012). Regardless of whether a youth is adopted out of foster care or placed into kinship care, their childhood adversities will have considerable implications beyond the point of permanency.

Contrary to the popular belief that adoptions take place in families of high socio-economic status, one third of adopted families live below the poverty line, and they may feel reluctant to adopt given the financial commitment (Office of U.S. Senator Blunt, 2019). Moreover, the act of kinship care is not an easy task. This is especially true for grandparents, who show significantly higher rates of depression than other individuals in the same age demographic upon becoming kinship caregivers (Baker & Silverstein, 2008). If a youth is adopted before they reach the age of eligibility for Chafee and ETV, they are no longer eligible for these programs, which could aid in alleviating some of the financial burden and stress for prospective adoptive and kinship families and foster youth. With more post-permanency supports, prospective adoptive and kinship families may be more willing to take upon the responsibility of adoption and reduce the amount of youth in the foster care system.

Between 2007 and 2014, anywhere between 17 and 21 states returned funds to the U.S. treasury that had been allocated to use toward ETVs and Chafee (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). Family First has allowed states to enter an application process to draw from other states' unused Chafee funds if a state has not spent their funds for two consecutive years. While this ensures Chafee funds do not go to waste, it also means that young people in states who forego Chafee dollars do not have access to these important resources.



Several states are leading the way to implement versions of tuition waivers and tuition subsidies for adopted youth. Currently, both Connecticut and Massachusetts provide funding for college. Connecticut offers funding equal to the current cost of tuition, room and board at the University of Connecticut. Massachusetts offers tuition waivers toward undergraduate degrees at their respective state schools. Both states require students to maintain good academic standing and set age eligibility requirements of when their degrees should be completed. While further studies are required, these programs have effectively improved the graduation rates of foster and adopted youth.

Policy Recommendations:

- **Extend the resources provided through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to all individuals who have been adopted from foster care, regardless of age.** Allowing the extension of resources will incentivize families to follow through with adoption and prioritize permanency by extending the services eligible to youth in foster care to youth post-adoption, as well as ensuring a safety net for informally disrupted adoptions. The need for services does not end after permanency has occurred.
- **Expand the Educational Training Vouchers (ETV) age eligibility for youth adopted from foster care and through kinship care from 14-years-old to 18-years-old.** Family First expanded access to Chafee services to youth who had a kinship care adoption between 14-years-old and 18-years-old. In line with this policy reform, eligibility for ETVs should be expanded for youth who had a kinship care adoption between 14-years-old and 18-years-old. Current law specifies eligibility for kinship placements and adoptions that took place when the youth was between 16-years-old to 18-years-old.
- **Require Title IV-E agencies with unspent Chafee funds to report to HHS on the reasons the funds went unused.** Currently, states are required to use Chafee funds and ETVs within a two-year window. State and tribal IV-E agencies should be required to report the reasons that any grants and funds received from the Chafee Act to fund Chafee services and ETV vouchers were unspent and returned to the U.S. Treasury or made available to other states as a result of going unspent for two-years. This will allow for informed suggestions to take place to ensure the youth in those states are receiving necessary services for life skills development and post-secondary education funding that they need.

Policy Report No. 11

Promoting and Tracking College Success for Current and Former Foster Youth

Alexandrea Talsky

Executive Summary

Without appropriate supports, young people who are in and aging out of the foster care system often have lower college persistence and completion rates than their peers in higher education settings. Over the past few decades, federal legislation helped to make college more accessible and affordable for this population, but these policy efforts have overlooked crucial supports needed to help current and former youth succeed in and graduate from college. To achieve better results for foster youth in higher education, Congress should collect data on the outcomes of current and former foster youth and use that knowledge to establish and expand support programs on college campuses that allow these students to take full advantage of educational opportunities and obtain their degrees.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

To ensure college retention and completion for current and former foster youth, Congress should adopt the following policy recommendations:

- Commission the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to research and write a report on outcomes for former foster youth in higher education and make recommendations on how to improve their educational success and college completion rates.
- Create a national database to collect data related to outcomes of former foster youth in institutions of higher education and require all federal programs assisting former foster youth in institutions of higher education to submit relevant data.
- Establish and fund a competitive grant program to enable institutions of higher education to create, expand, and evaluate support programs for its students who are current and former foster youth.

Personal Reflection

My experiences with the foster care system have shaped who I am and what it means to achieve in life, especially through higher education. Child Protective Services took me out of the home of my drug-addicted parents when I was only eight years old. What followed was a tumultuous period where I became isolated from my siblings and suffered significant instability. Even after going to live with my grandmother and finding some stability, I still longed for a place where I could be recognized for my hard work and personal achievement. School became that space for me, and my passion for education eventually led me to pursue a college education.

Upon enrolling in college, I understood that I would face challenges in being a first-generation college student without any parental figures to support



me financially or emotionally. Fortunately, I received the full tuition Morgridge Foster Care Scholarship and was the first recipient of the Meadows Fund Foster Care Scholarship to fund my undergraduate education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). I soon realized, however, that there was not a strong on-campus support system for current and former foster youth.

Despite my desire to succeed, I faced unique obstacles that my university was not equipped to navigate. During my first two years at university, for example, I searched for someone who could help me understand how to file tax forms which were uniquely complicated due to my scholarship and grant awards and to assist in communicating with the financial aid office after its repeated errors. In addition, there was no one on campus that I could turn to for emotional support, managing school and family commitments, or navigating academic tracks and requirements. It was not until my junior year when I met an admissions staff member who was passionate about helping former foster youth that I found the support I needed to effectively overcome the challenges that are specific to the foster youth experience in higher education.

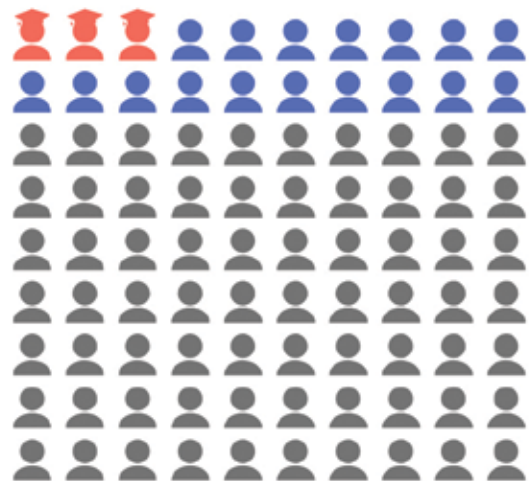
The barriers I faced while obtaining my undergraduate degree threatened my successful completion of college. I was fortunate enough to overcome these difficulties and achieve my dream of becoming a college graduate, but for many others in my situation, one or more of these obstacles would be enough to disrupt their college education and prevent them from graduating. My experience made it clear to me that former foster youth do not lack the potential for success, only the support to help them navigate their educational paths. My goal is to help the federal government and institutions of higher education better understand the unique educational barriers facing foster youth and provide them with the tools to bridge the gap to college success.

The Problem

There are significant disparities in college retention rates for individuals who are in and aging out of the foster care system as compared to their non-foster youth peers. The Midwest Study, a comprehensive evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth, found that only 3% of the 20% of former foster youth who had enrolled ultimately earned their college degrees (Courtney et al., 2011). While former foster youth enrollment rates are improving in higher education, there has been little progress in their retention rates. Current federal law has helped to improve college accessibility for former foster youth, but students continue to face considerable challenges in continuing their educations and completing their degrees. It is vital to ensure the funds allocated to support former foster youth in higher education are a worthwhile investment by aiming federal dollars both at increasing accessibility and making college success attainable. Without specific supports

College Enrollment and Persistence for Foster Youth

20% of Foster Youth Enroll in College, but only 3% Graduate with their Degree



Created June 25, 2019 | Data Source: Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). Midwest evaluation of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26.

and programs to help former foster youth navigate their college experiences, they will be less likely to obtain their degree, achieve financial stability, and experience other post-secondary successes.

Current Law

There are four main problems with current law and research related to former foster youth in higher education. First, current law seeks to address college accessibility and enrollment for former foster youth but does not address college persistence for these same students. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood has made college more accessible by providing former foster youth with money through the Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program which funds an undergraduate education for up to five years. Although the Chafee program does not currently require states to track degree attainment for its recipients, the 2018 California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) reported that college persistence was neither increased nor decreased by extending foster care. This study points out that financial support alone is insufficient to address college retention rates without a range of other supports.

The Student Support Services (SSS) program is another federal program that assists former foster youth and other underprivileged students in higher education. This program is one of eight funded through the Federal TRIO programs under part Title IV of the Higher Education Act. The TRIO programs fund institutions of higher education to assist in academic development, to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with assistance in meeting basic college requirements, and to support students in the successful completion of their postsecondary degrees. Because the SSS program is not specifically designed to meet the needs of former foster youth, it does not currently address some of the unique challenges that contribute to their lower retention rates in higher education settings, such as housing instability during school breaks or trauma-informed counseling. Different methods and tools are needed to provide the appropriate supports to help former foster youth complete their degrees.

Furthermore, the SSS program and the Chafee ETV program do not collect data on the postsecondary retention rates among former foster youth, and alternative data sources on college success for foster youth are outdated. The SSS program, for example, reports the percentages of the entire student population utilizing the program in its Student Services Annual Performance Reports, but it does not specifically disaggregate data on former foster youth (Tsze et al., 2015). Similarly, the Chafee program does not track educational outcomes for its recipients, and there is no alternative national data source on the program's impact on higher education retention rates for former foster youth. The most significant data currently available on first year college outcomes and dropout rates for former foster youth come from The Midwest Study published in 2011. While the data is thorough, it was not designed to track outcomes for former foster youth in higher education settings or to evaluate areas of need and effectiveness of new and existing programs (Courtney et. al., 2011). This study is often cited as an example of poor retention rates for former foster youth across the nation, but due to its limited sample population, the findings are not necessarily representative of former foster youth across all states.

Finally, effective programs exist to collect data and improve educational outcomes for former foster youth, but these programs are not being elevated and supported as best practices at the national level. There are also few incentives for new, evidence-based programs aimed at providing wrap-around support for former foster youth currently in college. Campus-based programs tailored to meet the unique needs of this population improve college retention. For example, the CARE Scholars Program at Central Connecticut State University is dedicated to closing the opportunity gap for foster and adopted youth through career counseling, peer mentoring, academic advising, and social and emotional support. A preliminary evaluation which tracked the outcomes of students over time found an improvement in overall GPAs for program participants between their fall and spring semesters (Soler, 2019). The federal government could do more to elevate and replicate programs like CARE Scholars and actively work with states and universities to ensure that current and former foster youth have access to the comprehensive range of support services they need to succeed.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure college retention and completion for current and former foster youth, Congress should adopt the following policy recommendations:

- **Commission the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to research and write a report on outcomes for former foster youth in higher education and make recommendations on how to improve their educational success and college completion rates.** More specifically, the report should analyze any existing data in college retention rates and identify barriers in higher education and post-grad employment and include information on model programs. After completing its research, the GAO should make recommendations on how to best require and collect new data on the educational outcomes of current and former foster youth and identify other methods on how to improve retention for former foster youth in higher education.
- **Create a national database to collect data related to outcomes of former foster youth in institutions of higher education and require all federal programs assisting former foster youth in institutions of higher education to submit relevant data.** The data collected should include drop-out, retention, and post-graduate employment rates for current and former foster youth. Programs like the Chafee and SSS programs should also be required to collect data annually on the population they are supporting and submit them to this national database. Data from these existing programs will help to determine the effectiveness of current programs and help improve outcomes for new and existing programs over time.
- **Establish and fund a competitive grant program to enable institutions of higher education to create, expand and evaluate support programs for its students who are current and former foster youth.** Through a competitive grant program included as part of the reauthorization of the *Higher Education Act*, institutions would be eligible to apply for funding to develop and implement effective campus-based support programs for current and former youth in foster care. The main goals of the programs would be to provide students with essential services such as information on housing, financial assistance, academic tutoring and guidance, connections to mental health support services, and career preparatory services to ensure graduation and post-college success.

Policy Report No. 12

Breaking Down the Barriers to Placement Stability for Youth in Foster Care

Anna Zhang

Executive Summary

Youth in foster care are living transient lives. Placement instability is a prevalent issue across the United States. For the past ten years, more than 130,000 foster youth have experienced two or more placements each year (Kids Count Data Center, 2018). Placement instability can be combated by two simple solutions: improving the way states match youth with prospective foster families and maintaining biological family ties. Additionally, when a move is required, notifying youth in advance of the change can serve as a protective factor against the trauma inherently associated with moving. Constant changes can create a domino effect of trauma, but by implementing these innovative strategies, we can improve the lives of many children in foster care.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

To ensure placement stability for children in foster care, Congress should:

- Require states to develop specific strategies, as part of their diligent recruitment plans, to better match children and youth with prospective foster families.
- Require states to report in their Title IV-E state plans how they are developing and implementing innovative strategies to build supportive partnerships between biological and foster parents and to provide funding for technical assistance to help states to implement these strategies.
- Amend the *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act* to require that the List of Rights included in each youth's case plan include a provision about placement stability and the right to prior notice and review of placement changes.

Personal Reflection

“When we make the monumental decision to intervene and remove a child from their home, we have a responsibility to ensure that we’ve placed them in a safe, stable, and healing environment, and that they are better off in this new setting than they would have been had they remained with their family of origin.”

-David Sanders (Casey Family Programs)

Throughout the four and a half years I spent in foster care, I experienced over 10 foster care placements. Every time I moved, I felt like I was starting a whole new life. Almost every time I changed placements, I also changed schools. This was very disruptive to my education and prevented me from creating lifelong connections and friendships even in adulthood. On several occasions when I changed placements, it was a surprise because no one ever notified me that I would be moving or why. This meant I could not process or prepare for the move before it happened, which in turn affected my mental health and self-esteem. One of the most traumatic moves separated me from my little sister, upon whose companionship I depended through such a challenging time in my life.

Many of my placements were disrupted because of the lack of compatibility with the foster family or due to their disregard for my love for my biological family and desire to remain connected to them. Family dynamics matter. Simple, yet critical information that could have connected me with a compatible foster home was not taken into account when determining a placement. I also never received any information about my “new parents” except for their names. Again and again, the agency would force me to play a guessing game, and I would end up in a placement that was not a good match for me.

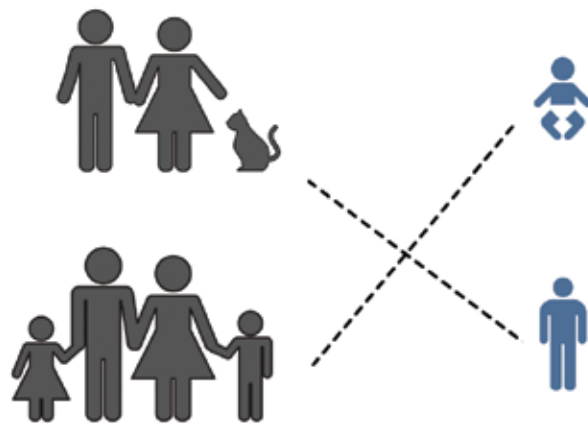
As I’m writing this, I can genuinely say there is only one foster parent I lived with and am still connected with today that had the secret recipe to support and care for me. She encouraged me to connect with my biological family, even though I aged out of foster care; I am grateful that she gave me the option to speak with them. By giving me that choice, she also helped me to heal. If the agency had used effective matching strategies or data-driven technology to help determine the best placement for me when I was in foster care, I could have had the opportunity to live a more stable, happy, and healthy life. An appropriate, early assessment could have helped to identify foster parents willing to engage in a true and supportive partnership with my biological family. This could have ultimately reduced the number of times I moved. Stability is critical, and children can only thrive in stable and nurturing environments where they have a routine, know what to expect, and do not have a constant fear of changing homes.

The Problem and Current Law

Placement stability is critical because each move results in negative outcomes for children in foster care. Multiple placements lead to delayed permanency outcomes, academic difficulties, as well as the inability to develop meaningful attachments (Casey Family Programs, 2018). Sadly, for the past ten years, more than 130,000 or 37% of foster youth have experienced two or more placements each year (Kids Count Data Center, 2018). My report will analyze three key issues that lead to placement instability – (1) unsuitable matches between foster youth and their foster family placements, (2) foster families’ failure to help youth maintain their biological family ties, and (3) the need to include placement stability and notice of placement change in the List of Rights of a youth’s case plan.

Examples of Compatible Matching Strategy for Better Sustained Placements

Matching strategies should take into account characteristics such as family dynamics, placement preferences, place of residence, age, and special needs.



Created June 30, 2019.

One leading factor in unstable placements is the lack effort in matching youth with appropriate foster families. Child welfare agencies must be proactive to prevent placement disruptions by considering the unique characteristics of the youth they serve. There should be a strong correlation between a child's needs and the foster parents' ability to provide adequate care. Matching should consider demographics of individual children, and other specific characteristics that can successfully connect a child to a family (e.g. food preferences, family activities, number of siblings, comfort with animals, etc.).

Every Child A Priority (ECAP), for example, is one research-backed management system that helps agencies find the best possible homes for children in need of foster or adoptive placements by managing and tracking the placement of children in care and helping guide placement decisions with "smart" placement algorithms and decision tools. The study from the University of Kansas found that youth who were placed using ECAP technology had fewer disruptions and experienced 22.5% improved placement stability. The children who used ECAP also spent 12% less time in foster care system and were reunited with their families more quickly (Moore, n.d.). ECAP is currently being used in seven states and results in youth reaching permanency an average of 53 days sooner (Paul Epp, ECAP COO, June 28, 2019). While current federal law does not explicitly address matching programs and strategies, it does require states to develop diligent recruitment plans as a condition of receiving Title IV-B funds.

Another leading cause of placement instability is that many individuals who desire to become foster parents are not willing to engage in a partnership with biological family members even though about 56% had a case goal of reunification with their parents or primary caretakers in 2017. One foster parent couple, for example, shared their frustration with what they saw as a "broken system": having to wait three and a half years to adopt children due to the continued goal or reunification with their families. Their attitudes about reunification efforts speak directly to the urgent need to establish stronger partnerships between foster families and biological families. Research has shown that the participation of birth parents in the lives of their children in foster care improves the child's emotional adjustment, increases placement stability, contributes to successful reunification, and reduces the risk of recurring maltreatment (Corwin, 2012).

A direct consequence of placement instability is unnecessary and abrupt placement changes. The *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act* states that foster youth 14 years and older are allowed to help develop their own case plan. The case plan must include a List of Rights document that describes their rights with respect to such issues as "education, health, visitation and participation in court proceedings concerning the child" and also requires youth consultation in "any revisions to his/her case plan and permanency plan" (Stoltzfus, 2014). Recognizing that an important component was missing from this law, California passed legislation in 2018 that requires that a social worker or placing agency provide a minimum of 14 days written notice to youth prior to any placement changes, except in cases of imminent danger (Advokids, n.d.). This gives youth a voice during the review process and prevents abrupt placement changes which can be detrimental to well-being.

Policy Recommendations

To maximize placement stability for children in foster care, Congress should:

- **Require states to develop specific strategies, as part of their diligent recruitment plans, to better match prospective children and youth with foster families.** As a requirement for receiving federal IV-B funds, states must have an approved state plan for child welfare services, including a component that “provides for the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families.” As part of this diligent recruitment plan, Congress should require states to specify the matching strategies they will use to take into account characteristics such as family dynamics, placement preferences, place of residence, age and special needs. States’ implementation of their matching strategies should be evaluated as part of the federal government’s Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs).
- **Require states to report in their Title IV-E state plans how they are developing and implementing innovative strategies to build supportive partnerships between biological and foster parents.** All states should be required to actively report back on how they are supporting these relationships. The federal government should also provide funding for technical assistance to states to help them implement strategies to strengthen familial bonds and cooperation between biological and foster families.
- **Amend the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act to require that the List of Rights included in each youth’s case plan include a provision about placement stability and the right to prior notice and review of placement changes.** Under the *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act* (2015), each state must provide young people (starting at age 14) with a case plan that includes a List of Rights with respect to a variety of matters, such as education, health, visitation, and court participation. Congress should amend the statute under the *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act* (2015) that requires each state to provide young people (starting at age 14) with a case plan that includes a List of Rights to include a provision about placement stability and the right to notice of removal and review process. The amendment should also restrict placements moves between the hours of 9pm-7am as movement between those hours can threaten the youth’s well-being ensured by the case plan.

Meet the Interns



ANTHONY ABSHIRE

U.S. Representative James Langevin

FOSTER CARE: California, Texas, and Wisconsin

EDUCATION: University of Michigan

RESIDES: Michigan

AGE: 29

Anthony Abshire is a veteran of the U.S. Army and has a bachelor's degree in social work from Portland State University. He is currently pursuing a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Michigan School of Social Work. Anthony is deeply committed to improving permanency and stability in the foster care system and advocates for this reform by speaking at conferences, teaching, guest lecturing, and training those who work in the foster care system. With personal experience in foster care for thirteen years, Anthony seeks to influence child welfare reform in order to mitigate the challenges current foster youth face while in the system.

JOSHUA CHRISTIAN

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance (Majority)

– U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley

FOSTER CARE: Indiana

EDUCATION: Marian University

RESIDES: Indiana

AGE: 21

Joshua Christian is pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology with a concentration in social work at Marian University in Indiana. As an advocate for foster youth and child welfare reform, he established quarterly meetings with the Department of Child Services Executive Team, helped lead a holiday group project, and worked with a team to create the Foster Parent Bill of Rights. Due to his commitment to advocacy for foster youth, Joshua received a national award from Foster Club and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He aspires to become a lobbyist in an effort to help as many foster children as possible and inspire others with his story.



LILIANA CORY

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) – U.S. Senator Patricia Murray

FOSTER CARE: Hawaii and Washington

EDUCATION: University of Washington

RESIDES: Washington

AGE: 25

Lily Cory has a bachelor's degree in human services and Spanish from Western Washington University and is currently pursuing a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Washington. As a foster care alumna, she is passionate about finding solutions to the issues surrounding child welfare. She has policy experience on the state and national level, most recently working on the Indian Child Welfare Act and TANF child only grants with Partners for Our Children. Lily has also worked closely with individual foster youth and families as well as students experiencing homelessness through her employment with Secret Harbor, Futures Northwest, Child Protective Services, and as an AmeriCorps volunteer.



RIA ESTEVES

U.S. Representative Vicky Hartzler

FOSTER CARE: New Jersey

RESIDES: New Jersey

EDUCATION: Ramapo College of New Jersey

AGE: 22

Ria Esteves is a recent graduate of Ramapo College of New Jersey with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work and a minor in public policy. Since then, Ria has been working with the Office of Resource Families of New Jersey, giving presentations on her personal experiences in foster care. These presentations focus on the importance of appropriate care for youth coming from backgrounds of trauma. Ria's goals are to obtain resources for youth who have been adopted out of foster care and to generate long lasting success for all populations of foster youth.

DAVID HALL

U.S. Representative Adam Smith

FOSTER CARE: Oklahoma

RESIDES: Oklahoma

EDUCATION: Oklahoma City University

AGE: 23

David Hall has a bachelor's degree in instrumental music education from Oklahoma City University. While pursuing his degree, David discovered a passion for public service and child welfare advocacy. With personal experience in the foster care and juvenile justice system and a proven dedication to improving the child welfare system, David was appointed to the State Advisory Group for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by Governor Fallin. He has also joined Casey Family Programs as a member of their 21st Century Child Welfare System Steering Committee and ensured the introduction of a model state legislative package in Oklahoma.



SHEREE HICKMAN

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance (Minority)

– U.S. Senator Ron Wyden

FOSTER CARE: California

RESIDES: Missouri

EDUCATION: Washington University in St. Louis

AGE: 23

Sheree Hickman received her Master of Social Work degree in December of 2018 and is currently pursuing her second, a master's degree in social policy, at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. As a foster care advocate, she conducts research and presents policy recommendations to strengthen supports for foster youth who age out of care. She has also worked as a youth mentor at a local non-profit in North Saint Louis for three years. Sheree is a champion for social workers becoming leaders in the policy field.



MACKENZIE MCGEEHAN

U.S. Senator John Boozman

FOSTER CARE: Pennsylvania

EDUCATION: King's College

RESIDES: Pennsylvania

AGE: 21

Mackenzie McGeehan is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in political science and a minor in political economy at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Her advocacy for foster youth started three years ago when she began to participate in the Luzerne County Juvenile Justice Mentoring Program as a mentor. Mackenzie continued to advocate for foster youth as an intern under Judge Jennifer Rogers in the Luzerne County Orphans' Court, where she was able to express concerns from various foster youths, about their guardian ad litem, to the court. In May of 2019, she will graduate from King's College and prepare to attend Drexel University's Thomas R. Kline School of Law in the fall.

ALEXANDER OLESON

U.S. Senator Roy Blunt

FOSTER CARE: Kansas

EDUCATION: Saint Louis University

RESIDES: Missouri

AGE: 20

Alex Oleson is a rising junior studying political science with minors in economics and urban poverty studies at Saint Louis University. Informed by various personal experiences with the foster care system, Alex advocates for mandatory training of foster parents in trauma intervention and better pay and resources for social workers. As a member of the Policy Committee for the Student Athlete Advisory and Micah Religious and Service Learning Community, Alex strives to effect change in his community and build the social and analytic skills necessary to represent vulnerable children as a lawyer in the future.



LINO PEÑA-MARTÍNEZ

U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means (Majority)

- U.S. Representative Richard Neal

FOSTER CARE: California

EDUCATION: University of California Santa Barbara

RESIDES: Massachusetts

AGE: 25

Lino Martínez has a bachelor's degree in environmental studies and history of art and architecture from the University of California Santa Barbara. Lino currently works as a caseworker at The Home for Little Wanderers, specializing in continuum wraparound care. Through this position, he has experience working with child welfare at both an individual and system level. As a foster care alumnus with a passion for civic engagement, Lino understands the intersection of complex trauma and social welfare and is deeply committed to transforming child welfare.



CHRISTOPHER SCOTT

U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar

FOSTER CARE: Connecticut **RESIDES:** Connecticut **AGE:** 23

EDUCATION: Johns Hopkins University & Central Connecticut State

Christopher Scott has a bachelor's degree in journalism and linguistics from Connecticut State University and received a 2-year residential teaching certification from Connecticut while taking graduate courses at Johns Hopkins University and teaching elementary education. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in counseling and higher education at CCSU. Chris co-founded and currently leads the CCSU CARE (Central Academic Readiness Engagement) Scholars program, which supports undergraduate students from foster care and adoption through mentorship and advocacy. The CARE Scholars program, staffed entirely by former foster youth, has over 90 students, and is one of the only college access programs for foster youth in New England.

ALEXANDREA TALSKY

U.S. Representative Sean Duffy

FOSTER CARE: Wisconsin **RESIDES:** Wisconsin

EDUCATION: University of Wisconsin Milwaukee **AGE:** 22

Alexandrea Talsky is a recent graduate of University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (UWM), where she earned a bachelor's degree in international studies and an honors degree and certificate in peace studies and conflict resolution. Currently, Aleks is a student representative for Fostering Success at UWM and Supporting Foster Youth at UWM, where she uses her knowledge and personal experience with the foster care system to support former foster youth in their higher education goals. In the future, Aleks hopes to assist those who are historically underrepresented. An issue she is especially passionate about is addressing the growing dropout rate of former foster youth in higher education.



ANNA ZHANG

U.S. Representative Lauren Underwood

FOSTER CARE: North Carolina **RESIDES:** Florida

EDUCATION: Florida A&M University **AGE:** 23

Anna Zhang graduated from Florida A&M University with a bachelor's degree of social science in criminal justice and has since been accepted into the master's degree of applied social science program at her alma mater. As a member of Florida Youth SHINE since 2014 and the current state chair of the organization, Anna has advocated fiercely for current and former foster youth in Florida and nationally. She has used her voice to advocate in testimonies before the Senate and House of Representatives and fought to pass legislation in Florida that will enhance rights and outcomes for children in foster care. Anna is deeply committed to raising awareness about the unique challenges that foster youth encounter.

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With gratitude,

The 2019 Foster Youth Interns

– Anthony, Joshua, Lily, Ria, David, Sheree, Mackenzie, Alex, Lino, Christopher, Aleks, and Anna

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