



FROM COVID-19 RESPONSE TO COMPREHENSIVE CHANGE:

POLICY REFORMS TO EQUIP YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN FOSTER CARE TO THRIVE



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



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INTRODUCTION

Youth and young adults in foster care yearn for and deserve lifelong families and supportive environments where they are nurtured and encouraged as they grow into adulthood. They are entitled to flourish in a world where their needs are met and their dreams can become a reality.

Ideally, this happens by ensuring that children and youth can remain safely with their families. If foster care is needed, it should provide children and youth with safe, nurturing environments that also keep them connected to their families, communities and culture.

Unfortunately, for many children and youth who must enter foster care, this experience often creates additional trauma and falls short of assuring their safety, well-being and family stability. This is particularly true for youth of color who are twice as likely as white children to be separated from their families and enter foster care, who spend more time in such care and who are more likely to age out of it without achieving family permanence.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new hardships and magnified existing challenges and disparities for young people in and transitioning from foster care.

This brief highlights historical federal child welfare policy achievements and urges Congress to champion new reforms to eliminate harmful disparities that persist for youth of color and promote long-lasting benefits for all young people in and transitioning from foster care. There is urgency and an opportunity for Congress to lead reforms and build on the important, but temporary, changes mandated by the *Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act*.²

The act's relief measures provide vital support to young people for whom the pandemic has been especially harrowing. They also represent the type of continuous and comprehensive support that all young people deserve on an ongoing basis, not just during emergencies. For example, relief provisions include the option for young people to remain in foster care and avoid aging out into homelessness. In addition, state agencies are receiving a threefold funding increase through The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program),³ which provides significant federal resources to serve youth and young adults. It's imperative that state and local leaders equitably and expeditiously implement these measures.

Young People as Architects of Change

Effective youth advocacy has resulted in policymakers taking a keen interest in the well-being of young people who experience foster care. Bipartisan youth-driven reforms can be traced back more than 20 years to the enactment of the Chafee program, a seminal act that established dedicated federal funding and guidance to states to help youth transition successfully to adulthood.

As advocates for change, youth and young adults must continue to guide us on how to better support and strengthen families and ensure positive, equitable outcomes for children and youth. Their vision for change is shaped by experiences and challenges encountered before, during and after their time in foster care. Working together with youth and young adults can help us develop better solutions, because they are the experts on their own circumstances and most knowledgeable about what works.

Before the pandemic-relief provisions expire, federal policymakers should act to continue providing vital resources and build a comprehensive approach to promoting young people's healing, well-being and success in adulthood. Solutions must explicitly address the long-standing racial injustices that have led to consistently worse outcomes for youth of color in foster care.

Federal policy reforms should:

- 1. prioritize permanent family connections** and overall well-being for youth in foster care by requiring agencies to establish adolescent and young adult services divisions;
- 2. improve access to housing** and other resources for young adults, while continuing to prioritize family connections, by making extended foster care universally available to youth in all states; and
- 3. create pathways to success** by expanding access to, and improving the quality of, the Chafee program's supportive services for young people to age 27.

POLICY REFORMS TO BUILD UPON

The best solutions are those that emerge from collaborative decision making among policymakers, program leaders and youth and families who have experienced foster care. Over the past 20 years, powerful youth-led advocacy has been effective in focusing congressional attention on the needs of youth and young adults who've experienced foster care.

Youth-led advocacy was pivotal in passing the 1999 Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (subsequently renamed the Chafee Foster Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood). This landmark legislation established a dedicated federal program to support youth in making successful transitions from foster care. Since its inception, and with bipartisan backing, Congress has amended the Chafee program several times to strengthen the way it supports young people in their adolescent and young adult development. These amendments include broadening the reach and scope of Chafee services; providing dedicated funds to better promote "normalcy" for young people in foster care through their participation in developmentally appropriate activities; and investing in the National Youth in Transition Database to ensure it yields quality data on how the program is serving young people. (See text box for an overview of the Chafee program and the recently enacted pandemic relief.)

In addition to the Chafee program, Congress has passed a series of landmark reforms spurred by youth-led advocacy and compelling research revealing that the adolescent and young adult years are

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood provides flexible federal funding to states, territories and American Indian tribes to support youth who have experienced foster care in their transition to adulthood.

- Chafee funding often supports educational assistance, career exploration, mentoring and preventive services.
- Agencies can dedicate as much as 30% of their Chafee funding toward room or board for young people.
- Chafee-funded services are available to youth who are in foster care or have been in foster care between the ages of 14 and 21, or up to age 23 in states that extend foster care to age 21 under their Title IV-E foster care program.
- Chafee-eligible youth may receive support from the Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV) program until age 26.

In December 2020, Congress enacted the *Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act* (Division X of P.L.116-260). Key provisions include:

- Supplemental funding for the Chafee program, bringing the total fiscal year 2021 funding to \$586.3 million (\$400 million greater than the regular fiscal year 2021 funding of \$186.3 million). States are not required to contribute matching funds.
- Extension of eligibility to age 27 for Chafee and ETV programs, and an increase in the ETV award.
- New program flexibility, including permission for states to use more than 30% of their Chafee funds to provide room or board for eligible youth and permission to use funds to assist youth currently and formerly in foster care (ages 15–27) with driving and transportation-related costs.
- Generally, program flexibility is in place through Sept. 30, 2021.

a critical time for helping young people heal and thrive. These reforms include:

- extending federal investments to support foster care services through age 21;
- more actively involving youth in decision making about their lives;
- promoting kinship connections;
- increasing federal assistance in adoption and kinship guardianship;
- disincentivizing inappropriate group placements; and
- providing targeted federal assistance to safely prevent the need for foster care.

In 2009 and 2010, the Senate and House formed congressional caucuses to engage young people directly and further study issues affecting their lives. Additional legislative action ensued, including looking beyond child welfare programs to examine proposals for health, housing, education and employment.

Without question, congressional actions, coupled with state and local reform initiatives, have led to important gains for children and youth in foster care. The past 10 years have seen a notable increase in kinship placements and a decrease in placements of children and youth in group homes and institutions. During that same 10-year period, there also has been an increase in the percentage of children leaving foster care for permanent families through adoption and guardianship, as well as a decrease in the percentage of youth leaving foster care without permanent families.⁴

These positive developments are encouraging but not sufficient for all youth transitioning from foster care or for creating equitable opportunities for young people of color.

HARMFUL DISPARITIES CALL FOR SWIFT, THOUGHTFUL ACTION

It is incumbent on policymakers to eliminate child welfare disproportionalities for children, youth and families of color by developing solutions that generate equitable outcomes for all. A failure to do so not only will preclude meaningful reform but also may inadvertently create greater inequities. Strategies must be tailored and targeted to meet the needs of different youth, including young people of color and young parents, to ensure that no youth falls behind.

Consider what we know:

- Low-income families of color are disproportionately the focus of child protective services investigations for reasons that include historic systemic racism and disadvantage, higher poverty rates and greater exposure to professionals who are required by law to report suspected child maltreatment.⁵
- Black children are overrepresented among youth in foster care relative to the general population of children. They are twice as likely to enter foster care as white children, despite studies that show the occurrence of abuse or neglect is lower for Black families than it is for white families.⁶
- Children of color who enter foster care have disparate caregiving experiences. Compared with white children, they have fewer familial visits, fewer contacts with caseworkers, fewer written case plans and fewer developmental or psychological assessments.⁷



- The rate of youth aging out of foster care without achieving family permanence is 10% higher for Black youth and 11% higher for Hispanic youth than the rate of their white peers, putting youth of color at increased risk of homelessness, poverty, unemployment and other challenges.⁸

WINNING POLICY SOLUTIONS TO DRIVE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR ALL YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

A growing body of policy research identifies programs and practices that are effective in driving better, more equitable outcomes for young people. We also know that certain policy approaches generate a return on investment while supporting youth and families. Aligning federal policy and funding to make these approaches widely available in all states and accessible to all youth and young adults should be the basis for a federal policy reform agenda.

1. Require foster care agencies to create adolescent and young adult services divisions

Youth in foster care need and deserve stable, supportive connections to nurturing adults who have the training and motivation to support young people in their healing and healthy development. Unfortunately, foster care experience is too often marked by frequent placement and school changes and, ultimately, exiting care without being reunited with their families or connected to another permanent family through guardianship or adoption. Since 2011, approximately 21,000 young people age out of foster care each year.⁹ Youth who age out face a much steeper climb to adulthood, as the consequences of being without family or economic resources makes them more likely to struggle with unmet health needs and in their school and work pursuits, and experience homelessness and poverty.¹⁰

We have the information and tools to spark transformational change. A growing body of neuroscience research and insights from young people provide us with a road map to building a better approach to supporting youth and young adults in foster care. Child welfare services should be tailored to the unique developmental needs of youth and young adults. Like younger children, youth and young adults in foster care need trauma-informed services that address and help them heal from their trauma and stable support from caring adults. Because they are at a different stage of life, adolescents and young adults must be involved as partners in decisions affecting all aspects of their lives: education, health, mental health and foster care placement.¹¹

Such change requires rethinking how we care for adolescents and young adults. Far too little time and attention have been devoted to ensuring that foster care agencies meet the unique needs of this population. A recently released study that examined the experiences and perspectives of youth in foster care highlighted a range of disturbing findings, including youth feeling isolated and hopeless during their time in foster care and others experiencing discrimination or abuse. Many reported that their caseworkers and support staff lacked sufficient training, capacity and accountability to effectively serve youth and young adults.¹²

Policies send a message. The lack of educational supports beyond age 21 tells me what you think of my ability to succeed.

- Makayla James
A young adult with foster care experience

Federal policymakers should require foster care agencies to establish adolescent and young adult services divisions to meet the specialized needs of adolescents and drive better outcomes, including healing and family stability.

Every child welfare agency should have an adolescent and young adult services division that prioritizes the delivery of developmentally appropriate services for youth ages 14 to 21. This includes specialized permanency and transition services and tailored services for specific groups of youth, such as expectant and parenting youth, youth who identify as LGBTQ and youth with special health care needs or disabilities. The adolescent services division should have staff with specialized skills and training in addressing trauma in older youth and nurturing positive youth development.

Involving youth in decision making should be a defining characteristic of adolescent and young adult services divisions. Congress should draw on the specific recommendations made by the National Academy of Sciences in its 2019 report, *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*.¹³ The report recommends that state and local child welfare agencies design approaches to ensure youth and young adults have an active role in decisions that affect their lives, while adjusting the level of adolescent involvement in decision making to best align with adolescents' developmental capabilities and needs. Supporting and including youth in their permanency planning must be an ongoing priority for adolescent and young adult services divisions. Agencies also should have mechanisms for actively involving youth and young adults in program design and continuous quality improvement.



Other clear findings from research show that family ties and other social relationships and networks are the essence of social capital and are crucial to healthy development and functioning. These connections nurture growth and build young people's knowledge, skills and confidence and aid in the successful transition to adulthood, resiliency and recovery from trauma.¹⁴

Establishing adolescent and young adult services divisions within child welfare agencies will lead to more developmentally appropriate activities for youth and help create a new norm of support for young people, ensuring they have continuing opportunities to engage in decision making as well as the individualized support and attention they deserve to help them chart a successful path to adulthood.

2. Make extended foster care available to youth in all states

Ideally, all children and youth who enter foster care will spend a limited time there and leave for a permanent family. When that does not happen, however, youth who turn 18 in foster care benefit from continued support as they develop critical life skills, relationships and resources that help them thrive as adults. Making extended foster care a Title IV-E plan requirement will benefit all youth who reach age 18 in foster care and will be a key driver of better results for youth of color.

Benefits to youth and young adults who participate in extended foster care include:¹⁵

- increased high school completion, enrollment in college and employment and earnings, as well as more likelihood of having savings. Black and Latino youth in extended foster care have similar or better outcomes than their white peers in educational and employment attainment;
- decreased odds of being homeless and reducing the number of times a youth experiences homelessness;
- increased food security; and
- improved return on investment — i.e., for every \$1 invested in extended foster care, there is a \$2 return in increased earnings based on completion of a bachelor's degree.

Federal policymakers should seek to make Title IV-E foster care available through age 21 in all states. Taking this step would build on the success of federal policy and align it with what young people with foster care experience have called on policymakers to support.

Advocacy by young people played a significant role in the passage of federal legislation in 2008 that gave states the option to receive federal reimbursement for extending foster care, adoption and guardianship assistance beyond age 18. Youth-led advocacy also has been pivotal in encouraging nearly 30 states to take up this option. Some states without federally supported extended foster care programs may offer access to services through state-funded programs, although those programs are generally limited to youth who meet more restrictive employment and education conditions.

***You expect me to take
on the world at age 17.***

- Catherine Kamara
A young adult with foster care experience

Despite research showing the many benefits to youth from extended care and support, only one in four had been receiving it prior to the pandemic.¹⁶ Thus, extended foster care has been underutilized as a driver of equitable outcomes for young people and needs to become more accessible across all states. This can be accomplished by making Title IV-E foster care available through age 21 in all states, building on recent congressional enactment of a moratorium on youth aging out of foster care as part of pandemic relief. This legislation allowed young people to access extended foster care regardless of reaching age 21 in foster care or their education and employment status. This is an important and significant shift in eligibility for extended foster care and sets new expectations that all youth should have the same resources into young adulthood. Making extended foster care programs universally available will reduce the number of young people aging out to homelessness, poverty and social isolation.

3. Revise and extend Chafee program services to better support successful transitions to permanency and adulthood

Unlike the architects of the Chafee program when it was first established in 1999, today's policymakers have the benefit of 20 years of policy research, including 10 years of federal data on the outcomes and experiences of young people served by the program. The data tell us that only a third of youth leaving foster care at age 18 received any Chafee-funded support services, according to research gathered by the Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. Young people who remain in foster care at least through age 19 were more likely to receive services,¹⁷ but overall many young people are not able to access the supportive network designed to assist them during this critical developmental period. Young people's heightened needs resulting from the pandemic further revealed the Chafee program's lack of capacity to reach and serve young people in need of support.

A recent analysis based on extensive input from state and local child welfare administrators reveals structural barriers inherent to the existing Chafee program that impede service delivery to youth and young adults. These barriers include lack of resources and capacity to meet the more intensive skill development needs of many youth. Such services exceed what the Chafee program can fund and are not the types of services that are reimbursable under the Title IV-E extended foster care program. Young people too often lack supportive adult connections and struggle to complete postsecondary education and maintain housing and stable employment after they are no longer eligible for extended foster care (after age 21) and Chafee services (after age 21 or 23, depending on the state).¹⁸ Yet the science on emerging adulthood shows that the transition to adulthood typically occurs from age 18 through 26.¹⁹ Over 10 years ago, Congress provided Medicaid coverage to age 26 for youth formerly in foster care, a game-changing policy that benefits the health and well-being of young people.²⁰

Federal policymakers should redesign Chafee services to ensure that state and local agencies have the guidance and resources to provide the developmental support that young people need to transition successfully to adulthood.

In redesigning the Chafee program, Congress should draw on the changes recently enacted by the *Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act* and by the *Family First Prevention and Services Act*. Key aspects of a youth- and results-focused policy for the Chafee program should include:

- increasing federal investment to meet demand;
- aligning age of eligibility with the developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood, thereby making youth ages 14 to 27 eligible for vital services funded by Chafee and its ETV program;
- continuing the program's broad array of services and targeting incentives and resources to ensure agencies have the means to meet basic needs, including housing and financial assistance;
- making family connections a priority, including (and especially) permanency for older youth and young adults, as well as facilitating relational permanency of family-like connections to increase well-being;
- strengthening youth and young adult involvement in transition and permanency planning and engaging young people on an ongoing basis in program design and continuous quality improvement, including strategies to eliminate racial inequities;
- taking steps to address the harm and negative outcomes associated with racism and disparate experiences that children of color face across the child welfare continuum of services; and
- mirroring policy on making extended foster care universally available to young people in all states, creating a dependable bridge of support by requiring states to meet core service and eligibility criteria.

Strengthening the network of supportive services requires a new federal investment, but it is one that produces positive outcomes for young people, as well as savings to society. If young people transitioning out of foster care experienced the same outcomes as their peers not in foster care, society would save \$4.1 billion per yearly group of youth who age of out care (over their lifetime). This includes:²¹

- \$2.17 billion in lifetime earnings;
- \$295 million in the costs associated with early parenthood;
- \$9.6 million in cost associated with homelessness; and
- \$1.6 billion in costs associated with incarceration.

CONCLUSION

Congress has been steadfast in its commitment to improving the odds for youth and young adults in foster care. Federal leadership is needed again, and Congress has a tremendous opportunity to build upon its bipartisan legacy on child welfare matters, with lasting reforms that address inequities, accelerate positive trends and ensure all youth and young adults have the same opportunity for success in life.

It is time to ensure child welfare systems have the capacity and guidance to improve the way youth and young adults receive services and achieve permanency, healing and economic security. It is imperative this improved way of serving young people promotes equity for and among the entire population of youth and young adults. In other words, services should be delivered in ways that eliminate the disparate experiences youth of color too often experience.

***We need housing
resources that do not
feel tied to poverty.***

- Elliott Hinkle (They/Them)
A young adult with foster care experience

Efforts such as extending foster care beyond age 18 have shown promise in promoting racial equity. Now it is time to scale and build upon such efforts so all youth can thrive. Ensuring all youth and young adults have opportunities to heal and thrive will require fundamental rethinking of Chafee programming — a shift in child welfare toward providing comprehensive sources of support and services that put young people on a path toward success. We cannot afford to delay this transformation for and with young people.

ENDNOTES

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