

**State of Florida
Department of Children and Families**


Charlie Crist
Governor

George H. Sheldon
Secretary

DATE: December 21, 2009

TO: Regional Directors

THROUGH: David L. Fairbanks, Assistant Secretary for Programs

FROM: Alan Abramowitz, State Director, Office of Family Safety 

SUBJECT: Quality Assurance Review - Independent Living Program – Youth 18 and Older

ACTION REQUIRED: Distribute to Community Based Care Lead Agencies

DUE DATE: Upon Receipt

PURPOSE: By this memorandum, please be advised the first phase of a quality assurance review of the Independent Living program has been completed and the report of findings is attached.

BACKGROUND: In response to various concerns raised by Florida's Youth SHINE, Secretary George Sheldon requested a quality assurance review of the Independent Living Program in order to address stated concerns and help to focus improvement efforts.

The quality assurance review is being conducted in three phases. Phase 1 is comprised of a process management review of services delivered to young adults who have exited foster care receiving Aftercare, Transition or Road to Independence Services. Phase 1 has been completed and is the subject of this report. Phases 2 and 3 include review of youth in care receiving transition and pre-independent living services. The reviews are tentatively scheduled for Quarters 3 and 4 of Fiscal Year 2009-2010.

Subsequent to this review, the Independent Living Re-design Workgroup was established. The workgroup will focus on issues specific to young adults formerly in foster care and will address many of the recommendations included in this report. The workgroup is comprised of service providers, legal advocates, former foster youth and individuals from the Department of Children and Families, other state agencies and community-based care organizations. The first meeting of the workgroup was held December 16, 2009.

1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

The key recommendations from the Phase 1 review are as follows:

1. The Department should set core contract requirements for structure and service delivery of the Independent Living Program (to include services for young adults formerly in foster care) and ensure these requirements are being met through contract oversight and continued quality assurance reviews.
2. The Department should lead the development of standardized training for youth, staff and foster parents that allows some flexibility based on area need, but includes core lessons with activities. Training should represent a more balanced approach to include not only practical skills, such as budgeting, etc., but also "softer" skills that promote self esteem and relationship building.
3. The Department should amend Florida Administrative Code 65C-30 to address and clarify responsibility for provision of Independent Living services and support to youth and young adults who reside outside their area of jurisdiction.
4. The Department should provide additional clarification of the determination of "residency" requirements, and subsequent provision of Road to Independence and Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) funds, for young adults attending school out of state.
5. The Department should evaluate the current Road to Independence requirements to allow for more flexibility for use of the funds; to include making these Road to Independence funds available for informal apprenticeships, internships, and "on-the-job training" for youth who are not ready for a structured academic or vocational program.
6. The Department should revise and streamline existing Independent Living forms, such as combining the Transitional Support Services Application and Transition Plan to include goal tracking activities.

ACTION REQUIRED: Please distribute this report to community partners and others who are involved or advocate for young adults served by the Independent Living Program.

CONTACT INFORMATION: For additional information, please contact Eleese Davis, Chief of Quality Assurance at (850) 921-9857 or eleese_davis@dcf.state.fl.us

Attachment

cc: Regional Quality Assurance Managers
CBC Quality Assurance Managers
Contract Managers



**Quality Assurance Special Review
Independent Living Program**
Family Safety Program Office

Executive Summary

In January 2009 Florida's Youth SHINE, an advocacy group for children, youth and young adults within the foster care system, requested Secretary George Sheldon review their concerns over inequities and inconsistencies in service delivery systems throughout the state. In response Secretary Sheldon directed the Office of Family Safety to conduct a statewide review of the Independent Living Program to assess how well the program is currently operating and how it can be improved.

Because the Independent Living Program is expansive and program components focus on services within age groups, the Office of Family Safety is leading the review which will be conducted in three separate phases.

- The first phase, which has been completed and is the subject of this report, focused on process management of Aftercare Services, Transitional Support Services and Road to Independence Services for young adults formerly in foster care, i.e., young adults 18 and over.
- The second phase will include a review of youth living in licensed out-of-home care who have reached their 17th birthday, focusing on their preparedness and planning for exiting care.
- The third phase will include children 13 through 16 years of age and will focus on the quality of pre-independent living assessments and service provision. Both will involve interviews with the youth and children.

Three data gathering activities were conducted in Phase One.

- 1) "System of Care" surveys of each Community Based Care Lead Agency (CBC) were generated to obtain information about how each agency implements Independent Living services and to gather data regarding the general structure of the agencies' Independent Living provider network.
- 2) Interviews were conducted with a sample of young adults receiving Road to Independence Scholarships, Transitional Support Services and Aftercare Services payments, and of young adults who responded to the Independent Living Checklist.
- 3) Focus group discussions were held with the CBC lead agencies in each region to gather information about the challenges lead agencies face in implementing Independent Living services, and to solicit suggestions about any needed changes to Florida Statute, Florida Administrative Code, policy or procedure.

The Department established a pre-review workgroup staffed with representatives from Florida Youth SHINE and the Independent Living Services Advisory Council (ILSAC). The workgroup reviewed and provided input into the proposed methodology and tools for the surveys and interviews. Suggested revisions were made and incorporated to all tools prior to the review.

Context

Florida Statute and Florida Administrative Code require services be provided to young adults formerly in foster care who have reached 18 years of age to ensure their successful transition into adulthood.

Aftercare Services are meant to help young adults continue development of skills and abilities; Road to Independence Services are intended to help students who are former foster children to receive education and vocational training; and, Transitional Support Services are intended to provide short-term funds or other services, which may include financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, mental health, disability, and other services that may be critical to the young adult becoming self-sufficient.

In FY 2008/2009, 1,475 youth aged out of out-of-home care. In June 2009, there were 2,045 youth receiving Road to Independence services.

Findings

The review concluded the following:

1. There are wide variations statewide in processes for providing Independent Living services to youth and young adults.
2. Although Skills Training for Youth is being reliably offered, this training does not meet all youths' needs and does not consistently promote positive outcomes for young adults.
3. While staff and provider training is available in all agencies and areas, training curriculum vary from area to area and there is a gap in training for foster parents and for staff providing services to the young adult population.
4. There are concerns about staff communication and coordination between and among case managers and Independent Living staff in "shared" cases in some areas, to include unclear roles and responsibilities, and inconsistent processes in providing independent living services and support to youth and young adults residing out of the area of jurisdiction.
5. Interviews with young adults and focus groups revealed there were considerable issues with regard to the transition of youth to adulthood and independence. Focus groups indicated there was a "mad dash" for youth to obtain all their skills and training in the year prior to their 18th birthday (during the critical transition year) and felt that if mandatory trainings were required at all ages, transition to adulthood would be a smoother process.

6. There were variations in young adult's understanding of, and satisfaction with, Road to Independence, Transitional Support and Aftercare services and payments.

Most young adults interviewed reported being satisfied with the assistance Case Managers or Independent Living Coordinators had provided them since aging out of the foster care system. However, many were not knowledgeable about some of the processes. Less than three-fourths of young adults reported they currently had a Transition Plan that was developed with their case manager and included specific tasks for them to complete in order to achieve independence.

Recommendations

1. The Department should set core contract requirements for structure and service delivery of the Independent Living Program (to include services for young adults formerly in foster care) and ensure these requirements are being met through contract oversight and continued quality assurance reviews.
2. The Department should lead the development of standardized training for youth, staff and foster parents that allows some flexibility based on area need, but includes core lessons with activities. Training should represent a more balanced approach to include not only practical skills, such as budgeting, etc., but also "softer" skills that promote self esteem and relationship building.
3. The Department should amend Florida Administrative Code 65C-30 to address and clarify responsibility for provision of Independent Living services and support to youth and young adults who reside outside their area of jurisdiction.
4. The Department should provide additional clarification of the determination of "residency" requirements, and subsequent provision of Road to Independence and Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) funds, for young adults attending school out of state
5. The Department should evaluate the current Road to Independence requirements to allow for more flexibility for use of the funds; to include making these Road to Independence funds available for informal apprenticeships, internships, and "on-the-job training" for youth who are not ready for a structured academic or vocational program.
6. The Department should revise and streamline existing Independent Living forms, such as combining the Transitional Support Services Application and Transition Plan to include goal tracking activities.

Quality Assurance Special Review Independent Living Program

Phase I: Young Adults Over 18 Years of Age and Older - July 2009

I. Background and Reason for Quality Assurance Review

In January 2009 Florida's Youth SHINE, an advocacy group for children, youth and young adults within the foster care system, requested Secretary George Sheldon review their concerns over inequities and inconsistencies in service delivery systems throughout the state. Consumers and advocates are concerned that young adults are not properly prepared for adulthood and that there are wide variances in how agencies operate and interpret statutes in meeting the needs of young adults exiting the foster care system.

In response Secretary Sheldon directed the Office of Family Safety to conduct a statewide review of the Independent Living Program (ILP) to assess how well the program is currently operating and how it can be improved.

II. Approach

Because the Independent Living Program is expansive and program components focus on services within age groups, the Office of Family Safety developed a project plan to look at three discrete populations in three separate phases.

- The first phase, which has been completed and is the subject of this report, focused on process management of Aftercare Services, Transitional Support Services and Road to Independence Services for young adults formerly in foster care, i.e., young adults 18 and older.
- The second phase, now planned to begin during the third quarter of Fiscal Year 2009 – 2010, will involve a review of randomly selected youth in foster care who have reached their 17th birthday in order to assess service delivery in preparing them for independence.
- The third phase, now planned to begin during the fourth quarter of the fiscal year, will include randomly selected case file reviews and case specific interviews of children in foster care who are 13 through 16 years of age in order to assess pre-independent living assessments and services.

To complete a process management review during the first phase, three data gathering activities were conducted.

1. "System of Care" surveys of each Community Based Care Lead Agency (CBC) were generated to obtain information about how each agency implements Independent Living services and to gather data regarding the general structure of the agencies Independent Living provider network.

2. Interviews were conducted with a sample of young adults receiving Road to Independence Scholarships, Transitional Support Services and Aftercare Services payments and of young adults who responded to the Independent Living Checklist (automated information system) using the Services to Young Adults Formerly in Foster Care Interview Guide. The purpose of the interviews was to solicit information from young adults on general Independent Living activities and to gain a better understanding of the young adults' issues and concerns regarding the payments or services they were receiving.
3. Focus group discussions were held with the CBC lead agencies in each region to gather information about the challenges lead agencies face in implementing Independent Living services, and to solicit suggestions about any needed changes to Florida Statute, Florida Administrative Code, policy or procedure.

III. Methodology

Statutory and Regulatory Authority

- Florida Statute Chapter 409.1451, F.S, Independent Living Transition Services.
- Florida Administrative Code 65C.31, F.A.C., Services to Young Adults Formerly in the Custody of the Department.
- Florida Administrative Code 65C-28, F.A.C., Adolescent Services.
- 1999 Foster Care Independent Act, Title 1 of the Act is the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP).

Tool and Process Development

The Department established a pre-review workgroup staffed with representatives from Florida Youth SHINE and the Independent Living Services Advisory Council (ILSAC). As required by ss. 409.1451(7) F.S., ILSAC was created by the Florida Legislature for the "purpose of reviewing and making recommendations concerning the implementation and operation of the independent living transition services."

The workgroup reviewed and provided input into the proposed methodology and tools for the surveys and interviews. Suggested revisions were made and incorporated to all tools prior to the review.

System of Care Surveys

Each of the 21 CBC lead agencies was surveyed regarding the structure of their Independent Living Program and individual protocols and processes that are in place to ensure service provision to youth and young adults.

In order to assess individual agency processes consistently statewide, the surveys were completed by the Region Quality Assurance Manager (or other designated Region Quality Assurance staff), in collaboration with the Region Contract Manager for the applicable CBC lead agency and the CBC designee. Information captured on the survey was based on self-reporting by the CBC/CBC designee.

Interviews with Young Adults Formerly in Foster Care

Attachment A

Interviews were conducted with young adults formerly in foster care to seek information about Independent Living services while they were still in foster care as well as their Independent Living experiences subsequent to “aging out” of the foster care system. There were 109 young adults ages 18-22 interviewed statewide, but representing each of the 21 CBC lead agencies.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were facilitated by Office of Family Safety Quality Assurance and attended by Independent Living staff from CBC lead agencies, Contracted Case Management Organizations, Community Support Organizations, Educational Liaisons, youth advocates, Department staff and Department of Juvenile Justice staff. These were held in each region during June 2009. Participants shared successful programs and practices and discussed barriers to implementation of Independent Living services for young adults formerly in foster care.

IV. Overview

Florida Statute and Florida Administrative Code require services be provided to young adults formerly in foster care who have reached 18 years of age to ensure successful transition into adulthood.

Aftercare Services are meant to help young adults continue development of skills and abilities; Road to Independence Services are intended to help students who are former foster children to receive education and vocational training; and, Transitional Support Services are intended to provide short-term funds or other services, which may include financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, mental health, disability, and other services that may be critical to the young adult becoming self-sufficient.

Funding for these services is provided through the federal Chafee Road to Independence Grant and Chafee Education and Training Voucher Grant. Florida matches both grants through general revenue funding. Expenditures for FY 2008/2009 were:

Program	Expenditures 2008/2009
Road to Independence	23,104,202.98
Education and Training Voucher	5,638,307.57
Aftercare Payments	890,389.06

In FY 2008/2009, 1,475 youth aged out of out-of-home care. In June 2009, there were 2,045 youth receiving Road to Independence services.

V. Issues and Findings

The following identifies overarching issues and findings from the System of Care Surveys, interviews with young adults formerly in foster care, and regional focus groups. Details regarding each component can be found in the attached summary reports.

1. **There are variations statewide in providing Independent Living services to youth and young adults.**

There were differences statewide as to who is responsible for providing Independent Living services to youth and young adults, as well as the staff to client ratio. This was identified both in the surveys and focus groups.

- Agencies reported Independent Living services were provided solely by the CBC lead agency, by a Contracted Case Management Organization (CMO) or through a combination of CBC and CMO staff.
- The ratio of staff to youth and young adult population also varied considerably. For the staff to young adult population receiving Road to Independence Scholarship funds (the largest number of young adults within the young adult population) ratios ranged from a low of 1 staff to six clients to a high of one staff to 150 clients.

There were differences statewide in the reported availability of funds for Transitional Support (TSS) and Aftercare services. There were also variances in the depth of services provided to youth and young adults. This was reported in the surveys, in focus groups and in comments from young adults who cited lack of funding as the reason that was sometimes given when they received a lesser amount of TSS or Aftercare funds, than requested. Issues included:

- Inconsistencies and variations in funding Independent Living Programs statewide, by the State and by Community-Based Care Lead Agencies to sub-contracted providers.
- Inconsistency in how resources are applied statewide, to include lack of Transitional Support Services and Aftercare Services availability in some areas, while other areas provide these services consistently. (It was unclear whether this was the result of inadequate funding or was due to differences in how funding for specific programs was utilized in some areas.)

There were inconsistencies and variations statewide and by county in community supported programs and other available resources to supplement the services provided to youth and young adults by the CBC lead agency and sub-contracted providers. As one would expect, areas that actively applied for grants or boasted an active Children's Services Council had a richer array of resources.

Attachment A

There were inconsistencies and variations statewide and even within local areas in communication and collaboration between Case Managers, Independent Living staff and Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) staff working with jointly served youth. There are:

- Formal processes in some areas, including monthly meetings between case management, Independent Living and DJJ staff, Cross-Over units and staffings for jointly served youth, Clinical Review Staffings for all youth placements other than traditional family foster homes and shared client lists between the CBC agency and DJJ.
- Informal processes in other areas, such as general Working Agreements between the agencies or promoting diligent involvement of staff on individual cases.
- Variations in working agreements from area to area.
- Inconsistent information-sharing practices between DJJ and Independent Living staff. Some focus group participants reported ease in obtaining reports of life skills provided by DJJ staff for youth that are in residential facilities, while others noted gathering this information is sometimes problematic.
- Inconsistent participation of DJJ staff in Independent Living staffings, although the reason for this was unclear.

There were differences by agency and sub-contracted provider in how life skills were provided to youth, evaluated for effectiveness and tracked.

- Although variations existed in the way agencies reported they provided services, most indicated life skills were provided through a combination of methods, to include specialized curriculum in a structured environment, foster parent/group home hands-on activities, training events sponsored by community resources and “other” sources (such as riding the bus with staff, going to the Social Security Administration office or visiting apartment complexes).
- Agencies also reported multiple mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of their life skills/services. The primary means was through youth assessment results, followed by youth outcomes.

It should be noted however, that at least one focus group raised concerns about the current assessment documents, indicating they don’t really work well with many youth, who tend to “Christmas Tree” (answering questions in a random pattern) these documents without giving much thought; while other youth have ranges of limited understanding of what the questions mean.

- Slightly over half of the agencies noted they required youth to demonstrate what they had learned in skills training. While interviews with young adults revealed the majority of individuals felt the Independent Living skills they received while in foster care were based on all or most of their special needs,

almost 20% indicated none of the skills they received were based on their needs and less than half reported they were asked to demonstrate learned skills.

There were differences in agency processes for tracking Independent Living requirements and completion of youth activities. While most agencies reported they had either a formal or informal process for tracking purposes, mechanisms ranged from standardized databases/systems in two agencies to monthly or quarterly spreadsheets in most agencies, and through contract monitoring in a small number of agencies.

- Focus group participants reported the statewide tracking system is inadequate in that it does not capture all requirements and completion of Independent Living activities for youth or current information on young adults (i.e. address, phone number, employment status, referral and financial request/approval dates, etc.)

2. Although Skills Training for Youth is being reliably offered, this training does not meet all youths' needs and does not consistently promote positive outcomes for young adults.

Training for youth heavily focuses on practical skills, such as money management, budgeting, cooking, etc., which are critical skills for youth to learn, but a more balanced curriculum, to include "softer" skills, such as promoting self esteem and relationship building, would likely serve to promote better outcomes for young adults.

Training for youth does not always capture their attention; it is often rote and lacks excitement. Focus group participants noted youth often tell them the trainings are "boring and uninteresting".

There is no mandatory training requirement for youth. While skills trainings are routinely offered (and some agencies noted they provided incentives for youth to attend), youth attendance is sporadic. Some youth do not attend at all. Several focus groups expressed frustration that there was no mandatory requirement for youth to complete these, stating this may contribute to young adults being ill-prepared to face the challenges of adulthood, and may also hinder them in achieving positive outcomes.

This is further complicated by differing attitudes of staff that provide these services and oversee the programs (which were noted during focus group activities)

- On the one hand, some participants were adamant that youth needed to attend and show proficiency in all skills areas before aging out of the system and becoming eligible for adult services, particularly Road to Independence Scholarship money. They expressed that requiring this was critical for young adults in order for them to achieve positive educational outcomes, as well as overall independence.
- Other participants indicated that agencies were forcing youth to complete activities just because they were foster children, and that (as foster children) their lives had

been extremely difficult through no fault of their own. They expressed that the agency's job was to work with youth and whatever skills and abilities they had at transition, regardless of whether they had completed any training throughout their time in foster care.

3. While staff and provider training is available in all agencies and areas, training curricula vary from area to area and there is a gap in training for foster parents and for staff providing services to the young adult population.

Agencies reported in their surveys that training was generally available for staff working with the 13-17 year old population and for foster parents who cared for adolescents, but noted less training was available for staff working with the young adult population.

- Training for staff with adolescent caseloads included child welfare pre-service, educational and career planning, training on normalcy plans, assessments and statutory/administrative code requirements to specialized trainings, such as transitional living classes, de-escalation training and servicing youth with disabilities and substance abuse.
- Most trainings for staff working with the young adult population were cited as being the same or similar to those designed for staff providing services to the youth population. However, one agency noted there were 20 hours of additional specialized required trainings for staff working with the young adult population (to include mental health, community resources and parenting training). Other agencies indicated they provide staff with training specific to forms, needs assessment, assisting youth in completing applications for funding and training related to Medicaid and Social Security benefits.

While training was noted to be available for foster parents, it was described primarily as being provided through Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting (MAPP) classes and foster parent association activities; followed by special events, local trainings and conferences. Focus group participants noted there was a need to provide additional training to foster parents regarding their teaching responsibility for foster youth (as well as how to teach or role model for those youth) with regard to skills development.

4. There are concerns about staff communication and coordination between and among case managers and Independent Living staff in "shared" cases in some areas, to include unclear roles and responsibilities, and inconsistent processes in supervision and support of independent living services for youth and young adults residing outside their area of court jurisdiction.

For Youth. While 65C-30.018 reflects Out of County requirements, it does not specifically address provision of Independent Living Services. Additionally, inconsistency in provision of these services may be impacted by the staff to client ratio or geographic spread of one area versus another. NOTE: Lack of out of county support requirements is particularly problematic in cases where jointly served youth are in residence in a Department of Juvenile Justice facility outside of the dependency agency jurisdiction.

For Young Adults. While young adults who move to another area are provided funding by their “agency of origin,” availability and timeliness of emergency funds may be impacted by their remote location. General support from Independent Living staff may vary, based on staff to client ratios, geography of an area and availability of staff, particularly in rural areas of the state.

There are also inconsistent practices statewide in the determination of residency, and subsequent provision of Road to Independence and Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) funds, for young adults attending school out of state.

5. Interviews with young adults and focus groups revealed there were considerable issues with regard to the transition of youth to adulthood and independence.

Less than 70% of young adults interviewed indicated their case manager or Independent Living Coordinator had assisted them in developing a support system prior to their turning 18 years old. Several others indicated they had developed a network of individuals for support on their own or through their Guardian ad-Litem or another individual in the community. Five young adults interviewed noted they had no one to go to for help, if needed.

Focus groups indicated there was a “mad dash” for youth to obtain all their skills and training in the year prior to their 18th birthday (during the critical transition year) and felt that if mandatory trainings were required at all ages, transition to adulthood would be a smoother process.

Focus group participants noted youth are required to make critical decisions during the year prior to turning 18, and most select the Road to Independence Scholarship route because it offers the best financial option for them as young adults. However, the youth is not always ready academically or emotionally to go to school as soon as they turn 18, or may never be ready for formal education, but they choose an educational path through RTI in order to get the “maximum” financial benefit provided by the State. This practice potentially:

- Sets young adults up for academic failure during the first year of RTI.
- Inappropriately pushes young adults to choose an educational or even a formal vocational path, when they might be more successful in an apprenticeship or “hands on” training activity, such as working on a construction site, with a maintenance crew or in the service industry. In support of this issue, while most young adults surveyed indicated they had some plan to finish school (many with a GED) or hoped to go to college or receive a technical certificate, one young adult replied “...she really wouldn’t call it a plan and stated...you have to go to school to get the Independent Living money”.

6. There were variations in young adult's understanding of, and satisfaction with, Road to Independence, Transitional Support and Aftercare services and payments.

Most young adults interviewed reported being satisfied with the assistance Case Managers or Independent Living Coordinators had provided them since aging out of the foster care system.

- Over 80% of young adults reported they have always been able to access someone from the agency and receive assistance in applying for a service, if needed.
- The majority of young adults interviewed also reported having been informed of their due process rights when denied a benefit. The primary method they reported for being notified of these rights was verbally through their case manager or Independent Living Coordinator, followed up with written notification along with the Notice of Adverse Action.
- Over 90% of young adults receiving the Road to Independence Scholarship reported their Case Manager or Independent Living Coordinator had assisted them with the RTI application and 80% indicated their Case Manager or Independent Living Coordinator conducted a needs assessment consultation with them that addressed all required activities.
- Most young adults, who indicated they had requested referrals for services, reported having been assisted by their Case Manager or Independent Living Coordinator in obtaining these.
- Over 90% of young adults receiving Transitional Support Services reported having worked out an agreement with their Case Manager or Independent Living Coordinator regarding contacts they felt were sufficient to meet their needs.

While most young adults were complimentary of Case Management or Independent Living Coordinator services, many were not as knowledgeable about some of the processes.

- Less than three-fourths of young adults interviewed reported they knew where Transitional Support Services (73%) and Aftercare Services (71%) applications were kept and how to access them.
- Less than three-fourths of young adults reported they currently had a Transition Plan that was developed with their case manager and included specific tasks for them to complete in order to achieve independence.

There were wide variations in survey responses provided by agencies regarding payment amounts and timelines of payments for Road to Independence Scholarship (RTI), Transitional Support Services (TSS) and Aftercare programs. Additionally, there were variations in responses young adults provided regarding these payments.

Attachment A

- Agencies reported multiple and differing processes to ensure timely RTI checks, ranging from monthly Excel spreadsheets and reviewing invoices to meetings between the Independent Living Specialist and other entities (Federal Funds Manager, fiscal representative, etc). In one agency there is a “Monthly Money Meeting” where the Independent Living Specialist, account manager and operations consultant review every young adult, their payment amount and who the check(s) is made out to.
- Most agencies noted checks were available and distributed by a specific date every month, generally between the first and fifth business day, although one agency reported they have worked to make improvements in this area subsequent to the Youth SHINE letter.
- Eighty-five percent (85%) of young adults indicated they had not received a late RTI payment that created a problem with their housing, school fees, utilities or other important bills. Most of the late payment situations had been resolved. However, time frames for resolution of the late payments ranged considerably; and in six instances late payments were not resolved for in excess of five days.

All agencies reported they had a process to ensure payment is received “expeditiously” in instances where young adults are in need of emergency assistance. These processes were mostly based on a determination of need through assessment and the urgency of the need as described by the young adult.

- Some agencies noted their case management organizations providing Independent Living services will accept applications and get approval through the CBC. Others stated they will pay for services out of pocket and get reimbursed later.
- While most agencies reported the time between check request and receipt varied, it was based on urgency of the need (ranging from 24 hours or less to 4-5 days). The majority of agencies indicated the average length of time for the young adult to receive the check after the request was made 24 hours or less.
- The timeframes for receiving Aftercare Cash Assistance payments for emergency needs were reported as ranging from 24 hours or less in the majority of instances to 4-5 days. One youth noted it took an excess of 30 days to resolve her rent situation. This individual was the only person who reported that a late “emergency” payment had resulted in her being without a critical basic need (stable housing).

Over 85% of the agencies stated that there was no presumptive maximum amount of TSS funds provided to young adults. While most agreed the funding was based on young adult need, two agencies noted they could not provide funds repeatedly for the same need and at least one other agency reported attempts were made to determine if the expenditure of funds was reasonable. Another agency indicated during this last fiscal year a decision was made that all funding requests over \$500 required approval of the Vice President of Client Services.

Attachment A

Focus groups noted there were inconsistencies in how resources were applied statewide, particularly with regard to Transitional Support Services and Aftercare Services. In one focus group, issues were also raised about lack of accountability by CBC providers to ensure they offered services and payments to young adults timely (expeditiously in emergency situations) with no arbitrary maximum amount (CAP).

- Sixty-seven percent (67%) of young adults receiving TSS funds reported they received the amount of funds requested or needed; and said they were satisfied and money had never been an issue. However, sixteen individuals reported having received fewer funds than needed to make ends meet. Three of these individuals indicated they were receiving \$416 per month (one had requested more funds; one did not know she could request a higher amount and the third said her amount was recently raised to \$520 because “she now qualifies for ETV”).
- Three young adults (about 13%) reported they had received a lesser amount of Aftercare Cash Assistance than originally requested.

Other issues related to services and payments for young adults formerly in foster care included:

- There is a lack of structure for the Transitional Support Services Program; the program is vague, unclear and widely interpreted.
- Excessive forms are required for Independent Living programs, particularly for Young Adult programs and require many staff hours that could be better spent in working with young adults. Streamlining and combining some of the forms would be beneficial to staff who complete them and for young adults who are sometimes confused by them.

VI. Summary

One of reasons for privatizing the state’s child welfare services delivery system through the community based care structure was for communities to organize their child welfare agencies in a way that best supports local needs. While this has been a daunting task, most communities have risen to the challenge and have an extensive network of supports for their local areas.

Based on information obtained from the review, communities that are rich in resources such as those with Children’s Services Councils provide more robust supplemental service array, and smaller communities with fewer resources rely predominantly on state funding for CBC contracts and sub-contracts with provider agencies. Services for the youth and young adults are often contingent upon the area of the state in which they reside, as are payments for some of the programs offered to young adults, such as Transitional Support Services and Aftercare Services.

Additionally, the review identified issues with regard to inter-agency cooperation when foster children are referred to the Department of Juvenile Justice. In some jurisdictions case files, staff interviews and youth interviews document high levels of cooperation between dependency and delinquency staff, while in other areas, relationships varied and were primarily contingent upon individual staff to facilitate.

Concerns were noted with regard to staff and provider training. Although training is offered in all areas, additional training needs were identified. Revisions to existing youth skills training and training requirements were also identified as areas needing to be addressed further. Communication among and between staff and providers, to include courtesy supervision situations, needs to be improved. All participants must share pertinent information with each other in order to achieve the best possible outcome for the young adult.

Lastly, young adults and focus groups raised concerns about transition activities, noting there are serious challenges young adults face as they exit the foster care system, to include deficits in housing in many areas and resource constraints for young adults, particularly those with behavioral or developmental issues, which is the case for many of our foster youth.

VII. Recommendations

1. The Department should set core contract requirements for structure and service delivery of the Independent Living Program (to include services for young adults formerly in foster care) and ensure these requirements are being met through contract oversight and continued quality assurance reviews.
2. The Department should lead the development of standardized training for youth, staff and foster parents that allows some flexibility based on area need, but includes core lessons with activities. Training should represent a more balanced approach to include not only practical skills, such as budgeting, etc., but also “softer” skills that promote self esteem and relationship building.
3. The Department should amend Florida Administrative Code 65C-30 to address and clarify responsibility for provision of Independent Living services and support to youth and young adults who reside outside their area of jurisdiction.
4. The Department should provide additional clarification of the determination of “residency” requirements, and subsequent provision of Road to Independence and Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) funds, for young adults attending school out of state
5. The Department should evaluate the current Road to Independence requirements to allow for more flexibility for use of the funds; to include making these Road to Independence funds available for informal apprenticeships, internships, and “on-the-job training” for youth who are not ready for a structured academic or vocational program.
6. The Department should revise and streamline existing Independent Living forms, such as combining the Transitional Support Services Application and Transition Plan to include goal tracking activities.