



Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan

Youth who will exit foster care due to age restrictions rather than a permanent placement face many challenges as they prepare to leave care and begin their adult lives. To ensure that youth transition successfully and experience positive outcomes, Federal legislation sets forth specific provisions requiring transition plans and what they should include. While it is important to understand and meet the legislative requirements for these plans, it is also crucial that child welfare professionals working with youth view transition planning as a process that unfolds over time and through close youth engagement rather than as a checklist of items to accomplish.

This bulletin is intended to help child welfare professionals and others partner with youth to develop a transition plan that meets Federal requirements, builds on their strengths, and supports their needs.

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Transition Planning as a Process

A successful transition from childhood to adulthood can be difficult even under the best circumstances. For youth in foster care, this transition can be further complicated by a lack of guidance and support from caring adults.

Transition planning should be viewed as a process that considers the youth's long-term plans and breaks them down into smaller, short-term goals. The goals should be specific and measurable. For example, a long-term goal could be having an apartment by age 18, and an accompanying short-term goal could be looking up the average rent in the area and identifying two potential apartments by a certain time. By viewing transition planning as a process that takes place over years—instead of solely the federally mandated 90 days prior to turning 18—progress can be made to help youth successfully prepare for independent living. Even though some States offer youth in out-of-home care the option to extend their placement up to age 21 and continue receiving services after they reach age 18, many of them exit care at 18 or younger (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Fryar, Jordan, & Devooght, 2017). Early planning also may help youth see the potential benefits of staying in care past 18 and make an informed decision about incorporating it into their transition plan. For resources on extending out-of-home care past age 18, visit *Extending Out-of-Home Care for Youth Past Age 18* on the Child Welfare Information Gateway's webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/outofhomecare/>.

The Federal requirements for transition plans often focus on the logistics of exiting care—housing, health care, employment, etc.—while the emotional, psychological, and developmental aspects may be overlooked. Child welfare professionals who work with youth on transition planning should use this time to partner with youth to assess their strengths and needs and address any current or future challenges to prepare them to become adults, foster self-determination, and build resiliency. All youth in foster care have experienced an adverse childhood experience. Many have experienced additional trauma, neglect, or maltreatment. These experiences can have

negative effects on brain development, mental health, and well-being. While caseworkers can and should work with youth to identify mental health and medical providers that serve adults, it is as important for them to work with youth to understand the impacts their life experiences may have had on them and how this may affect their transition from care into adulthood.

Planning must be guided by youth's wishes, hopes, and dreams. However, caseworkers may need to work with the youth to make sure the goals are attainable. For example, if a youth wants to get his or her own apartment but has difficulty staying employed, the caseworker or other adults in the youth's life may need to work with the youth to manage expectations and what steps the youth may need to take to overcome barriers (e.g., helping youth access public transportation so they can get to work on time and keep their job, and therefore be able to pay for their apartment, or work with them on aspects of professionalism, such as punctuality). Working with youth on these issues could be challenging since teenagers' brains are still developing—particularly the area of the brain that deals with logic and reasoning (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).

Helping youth develop lifelong connections should also be a part of the transition-planning process. Having caring adults in youths' lives work with them on these planning tasks can lay the foundation for relationships that will last beyond emancipation. Some States have incorporated this principle into practice by having youth include the important adults in their lives in their transition-planning meetings.

One framework professionals can use to help develop transition plans with youth is the William Bridges' Transition Model, which defines transition as the internal process that happens when individuals are faced with change (William Bridges Associates, n.d.). The framework outlines three phases of transition (endings, the neutral zone, and the new beginning), and it can give child welfare workers and youth the language they need to delve into the emotional and psychological stresses of change. Helping youth adjust by talking with them about "what was" and "what will be" is an important aspect of

helping them transition out of care. More information about this transition model can be found in *Quality Case Planning With Young Adults in Extended Foster Care*, a brief published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, at www.aecf.org/resources/quality-case-planning-with-young-adults-in-extended-foster-care/.

What Should Transition Plans Include?

Transition plans should ensure the collection of important documentation and paperwork that all young adults need. The Fostering Connections Act provides a general list of elements that must be included in transition plans, such as the youth's plans for housing, employment, mentoring services, and education. How these specific components are covered or addressed can vary by State and even by agency. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act requires the case review system¹ to ensure that all youth leaving foster care because they reached age 18 or older (if the State elected to increase the age) to have a copy of the following items:

- Birth certificate
- Social Security card
- Health insurance information
- Medical records
- Driver's license or State-issued identification card

In addition to these five required documents, a list of 15 recommended documents is available in the American Bar Association's *Sample State Legislation to Extend Foster Care, Adoption and Guardianship Protections, Services and Payments to Young Adults Age 18 and Older* at https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/empowerment/sample_leg_18_with_cover_final.authcheckdam.pdf#page=34.

¹ The case review system is a procedure for ensuring that each child has a case plan designed to place the child in the least restrictive and most appropriate setting, consistent with the best interests and special needs of the child, and that the status of each child is reviewed no less frequently than every 6 months by a court of administrative review to determine if the placement is still appropriate and the extent to which the case plan is being followed, among other things (Social Security Act §475(5)).

What's the Difference Between a Transition Plan and Independent Living Services?

A **transition plan** is required by the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (the Fostering Connections Act) for each youth exiting foster care. Ninety days prior to a youth's 18th birthday (or the age required by the State for aging out of care), the youth, his or her caseworker, and other representatives of the youth's choosing must develop the plan. Specific elements—such as housing, education, employment, mentoring, and continued support services—must be included. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act amended the transition plan provision to require that youth be educated about the importance of designating someone who can, when necessary, make health-care decisions on their behalf. Transition plans must be personalized at the direction of the child.

Independent living services are provided by programs (as referred by caseworkers) to youth in or formerly in out-of-home care to help them prepare for self-sufficiency. Services often focus on money management skills, educational assistance, household management skills, and employment preparation. For more information on independent living services and resources, visit the Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/>.

FosterClub's *Transition Toolkit* provides youth with a step-by-step process for thinking about leaving care and provides transition plan templates. The guide is centered on 10 critical areas: finances, employment, life skills, identity, permanence, education, health, housing, transportation, and community. The toolkit is available for free on FosterClub's website at <http://store.fosterclub.com/transition-toolkit-download/>.

What Are the Federal Legislative Requirements for Transitional Living Plans?

The Fostering Connections Act requires that a transition plan must be finalized no later than 90 days prior to the youth turning age 18. The most challenging, yet critical, element of the Fostering Connections Act is the provision that each plan should be "as detailed as the child may elect." This requirement shifts child welfare workers' focus to educating and supporting youth as they decide what specifics they would like in their plans. One way child welfare workers can implement this is by going through a worksheet that details the goals of the plan with youth during a series of youth-led meetings. It is important to note that while youth have the right to refuse to participate in a formal transition process, caseworkers still need to make, as well as document, their efforts to engage youth in the formal planning process until they exit care. The transition plan requirement creates an opportunity to bring together several new requirements for working with youth, including the health-care proxy requirement.

The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act requires agencies to consult with a youth age 14 and older in developing or revising their case plans and to requiring a document describing the rights of the youth to education, health, visitation, and court participation as well as the right to stay safe and avoid exploitation.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) issued a program instruction (PI) for the Fostering Connections Act and an information memorandum (IM) for the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act in 2010 and 2014, respectively, which provided additional

guidance and reiterated other requirements for planning, such as the following:

- Case plans² must include a written or recorded description of the programs and services available to help youth in foster care age 16 or older prepare for the transition from care.
- Permanency hearings for youth age 16 or older must determine the necessary services to help them transition from foster care to independent living.
- Youth age 14 and older have the right to help develop their own case and transition plans.
- The case plan must accomplish the following:
 - Document the youth's education, health, visitation, and court participation rights
 - Give the youth the right to receive an annual credit report and assistance in correcting any inaccuracies
 - Require the inclusion of a signed acknowledgement that the youth was provided these rights and that they were explained in an age-appropriate way
 - Must be developed in consultation with the youth and, if the youth wants, with the help of two members of the case-planning team who are not the caseworker or foster parent
- The case plan and permanency hearing must describe the services available to help youth transition to adulthood.

The combination of the PI, which requires case plans to include available services starting at age 16, and the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, which lowers the age youth can begin to be involved in their transition planning to age 14, reflects and promotes best practices. The more time youth have to prepare for their transition from care, the more successful they will be. However, child welfare professionals should use their best judgement on when to start, as every child matures at a different rate.

² A case plan is a living document that describes the outcomes, goals, and tasks concerning a child's care while in placement. These goals include ensuring that the child receives safe and proper care while in State custody and that appropriate services are provided to the parents and foster parents, as well as determining goals and objectives families must meet to create a safe, permanent home for the child. Progress is monitored by the caseworker and may affect court proceedings (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

The complete PI (ACYF-CB-PI-10-11) is available on the ACF website at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws_policies/policy/pi/2010/pi1011.htm#sectc.

The IM (ACYF-CB-IM-14-03) is also available on the ACF website at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/im1403>.

For an example of how caseworkers can implement these requirements into their practice, see our description of EPIC 'Ohana in Hawaii in the What Are States Doing? section of this bulletin.

The National Foster Care Coalition published a paper on the Fostering Connections Act that tackles several questions pertaining to transition plans. The document addresses topics such as how States should engage youth in the development of the personalized transition plan, what role the courts play in transition planning, and more. *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act: Frequently Asked Questions on the Provisions Designed to Impact Youth and Young Adults* is available on the American Bar Association's website at http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/empowerment/nfcc_faq_older youth.authcheckdam.pdf.

The July 2011 issue of *The Judges' Page*, a National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association newsletter, spotlights the Fostering Connections Act. Several articles focus specifically on the transition plan requirement and the role the courts play in implementation. The entire issue is available at http://www.casaforchildren.org/site/c.mtJSJ7MPIsE/b.7522045/k.DD83/July_2011.htm.

The Juvenile Law Center published an issue brief in February 2016 titled *The Role of the Court in Implementing the Older Youth Provisions of the Strengthening Families Act*. This issue brief outlines the requirements of the act, gives strategies for attorneys and advocates to prepare youth for court and case planning, and offers suggestions on how the courts can effectively implement them. The brief is available at http://jlc.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdfs/ABAIssueBrief-SFAforCourts-Feb2016_0.pdf.

More information on Fostering Connections and other child welfare legislation is available in Information Gateway's *Major Federal Legislation Concerned With Child Protection, Child Welfare, and Adoption* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/otherpubs/majorfedlegis/>.

Promoting Success for Youth in Foster Career

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, developed a framework to help professionals and organizations meet the needs and improve transition outcomes of youth aging out of foster care. This short guide focuses on five areas:

- School-based preparatory experiences
- Career preparation and work-based experiences
- Youth development and leadership opportunities
- Support and community services
- Family involvement and support

Professionals can use this framework to create a foundation for youth that leads to better outcomes. For more information, visit <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/publications/guideposts-for-success-for-youth-in-foster-care/>.

Engaging Youth in Planning

It is also important to engage youth in planning their future—especially if youth are leaving foster care before the maximum age permitted. It can be difficult to get youth to engage in planning for things that seem far into the future to them. The problems and issues they are dealing with presently may seem much more important

than planning for an apartment, secondary education, or career development. It is important to recognize that these difficulties may stem from trauma that youth have experienced previously. They also may lack the executive functioning skills necessary to engage in this kind of planning because, among other potential reasons, the part of the brain that specializes in this is still in development into young adulthood for all youth and trauma and maltreatment have negative effects on the brain (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). Additionally, youth may still be developing coping skills to accept responsibility for their actions and the resulting consequences as well as the ability to understand that things may take time to be achieved. However, the earlier youth can get involved in working toward their future goals, the better their outcomes will be.

The Children's Bureau's Capacity Building Center (CBC) for States focuses on giving agencies the skills and tools they need to build partnerships that will help them achieve better outcomes for youth. A comprehensive system that includes collaboration among workers, youth,

foster parents, other caregivers, and organizations is the most effective way to successfully help youth build the skills they need to transition out of care. The CBC for States developed a useful web section that focuses on engaging youth in all areas of child welfare service delivery. It is available at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/youth-development/>.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation also developed resources on best practices for engaging youth in planning. *Success Beyond 18: Quality Case Planning With Young Adults in Extended Foster Care* is an issue brief that highlights the key elements of a successful case-planning process, with an emphasis on relationship building. It is available at <http://www.aecf.org/resources/quality-case-planning-with-young-adults-in-extended-foster-care/>. Additionally, its factsheet titled *Achieving Authentic Youth Engagement: Core Values & Guiding Principles* focuses on three key elements to engagement: preparation, support, and opportunity. This factsheet is available at <http://www.aecf.org/resources/achieving-authentic-youth-engagement-core-values-guiding-principles-2/>.

National Youth in Transition Database

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the Chafee program) that allows States to provide financial, housing, employment, education, and other support services to youth who left foster care at 18 but had yet to turn 21. It also required the Children's Bureau to establish a system to track the services States provide to youth currently and formerly in foster care as well as collect outcome data that could be used to assess State performance in providing services. In response, the Children's Bureau developed the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). NYTD collects data directly from youth through a survey. Youth may decline to answer any question or refuse to participate altogether. These surveys may be administered by email, phone, in-person interview, or other methods States may choose.

Every May and November, States report data to NYTD about the demographics of youth served by the Chafee program and information about the services provided. States began collecting data in 2010 and submitted the first data sets to the Children's Bureau in May 2011. In 2016, the Children's Bureau released a NYTD brief that shows the areas in which youth are succeeding and struggling and demonstrates where more work is needed, such as helping youth prepare for leaving foster care and transitioning to self-sufficiency. That brief and others are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/data-briefs>.

In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) made several changes to the Chafee program. In addition to changing the name to the John H. Chafee Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, the act allows States to increase program eligibility from age 21 to age 23 if the State extends foster care eligibility from age 18 to age 21 and revises the program's purpose to specify that it is available to youth who have experienced foster care at age 14 or older. FFPSA also amended NYTD provisions to require the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to submit a report on NYTD that includes descriptions of entries into foster care, foster care experiences, and characteristics of individuals who report poor outcomes; benchmarks for poor outcomes; and analyses of differences in outcomes for children currently or previously in foster care and associations between factors.

To view an IM that provides additional detail about the FFPSA, visit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/im1802>.

Additional information about NYTD, including data briefs and reports, are available on the Children's Bureau website at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/reporting-systems/nytd>.

What Are States Doing?

In an effort to improve outcomes such as emotional well-being and occupational and educational attainment, the Children’s Bureau funded projects in four States (Nevada, California, Illinois, and Rhode Island) in 2011 to provide services to help youth build and use relationship skills to develop connections with others. A 2017 report produced by the Center on Children and Families at The Brookings Institution, *Care and Connections: Building Relational Gaps for Foster Youths*, explores the preliminary findings of these projects. Research suggests that these connections improve outcomes such as occupational attainment and connectedness and give youth a better quality of life (Denby, Gomez, & Reeves, 2017). However, there is a scarcity of programs that focus on how to help youth in foster care effectively build and sustain relationships. The full report is available at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/09-14-2017_fostercarereport2.pdf.

In 2017, Child Trends released *Supporting Young People Transitioning From Foster Care: Findings From a National Survey*, which was commissioned by the Better Housing Coalition and the Children’s Home Society of Virginia. The report uses results from a survey, which was completed by 47 States, to examine strategies for supporting young people transitioning out of foster care. Highlights of findings include the following (Fryar, Jordan, & Devooght, 2017):

- Despite the majority of States extending foster care past age 18—even up to age 23 in one State—77 percent of States reported youth leaving foster care 1 to 3 years earlier than the maximum age.
- Cooperation between agencies and systems, such as the juvenile justice agency, mental health agencies, other State agencies, and schools, is essential in creating a web of support and wraparound services for youth. Additionally, this can streamline services and prevent a youth from receiving the same service from multiple agencies.
- Housing is an area in need of improvement. A lack of stable housing can often be a barrier for youth that makes it difficult for them to become self-sufficient.

- While some States are adopting evidence-based and evidence-informed practices, there is plenty of room for growth. About one-third of States use these kinds of practices in some of their services, and 11 States do not use these kinds of practices in any of their service categories.

A companion piece, *Supporting Young People Transitioning From Foster Care: Virginia Findings From a National Survey and Policy Scan*, takes a closer look at services and practices in Virginia and highlights areas of success and possible growth. For example, while Virginia has many supports and services available for education, employment, housing, finances, health care, and permanency for youth, not all services are available statewide (Jordan, Fryar, & Devooght, 2017). Cross-county collaboration could be the first step in ensuring all Virginian transitioning youth have access to the same support systems. These resources are available at <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/supporting-young-people-transitioning-foster-care-findings-national-survey/> and <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/supporting-young-people-transitioning-foster-care-virginia-findings-national-survey-policy-scan/>.

A number of States have developed other programs and resources, including the following examples:

- **In Hawaii**, EPIC ‘Ohana, Inc., employs the E Makua Ana Youth Circle program, a culturally appropriate program for working with youth to develop their transition plans. The program provides worksheets, which are customized for each island, to youth to help them plan their transition. The worksheets list resources for housing, education, and finances and provide other pertinent information (e.g., application dates, requirements). Youth preparing to leave foster care identify members of their Circle, who later come together to help plan for housing, education, employment, physical and mental health, and other needs. One of the most notable characteristics of the Circle is that during the Circle meeting, youth are given private time to select their own transition plans (with the ability to ask for guidance if necessary), which they then present to their Circle. A summary of the Circle

and transition plan is provided to the youth and Circle participants after the meeting. More information is available on the EPIC 'Ohana, Inc., website at <http://www.epicohana.info/youthcircle.aspx>.

- **Minnesota's** Department of Human Services produced a best-practices guide for child welfare professionals to help youth transition from out-of-home care to adulthood. The guide provides sample goals and objectives for a transition plan, guidance and resources, curricula information, and information on how caregivers can help youth transition to independent living. *Helping Youth Transition From Out-of-Home Care to Adulthood: Best Practice Guide* is available at <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-6530-ENG>.
- **Iowa** has a transition-planning specialist (TPS) in each of its five regions. The TPS provides training and technical assistance to staff, providers, and others on transition planning. Each youth referred to a TPS is provided with an information packet with tips on education, housing, money management, and more to help them plan for their transition to independent living. More information on Iowa's TPSs, the information packet, and other resources are available on Iowa's Department of Human Services website at <http://dhs.iowa.gov/transitioning-to-adulthood>.
- **Texas** requires a transition plan for all youth ages 14 years and older in out-of-home care. After the Fostering Connections Act, the State also added requirements to strengthen their transition planning process, including a meeting 90 days prior to the youth's 18th birthday and 90 days prior to the youth's transition from care. View information about Texas' Preparation for Adult Living program and other transitional-living services at https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Youth_and_Young_Adults/Preparation_For_Adult_Living/.
- The **Oregon** Department of Human Services (DHS) youth transitions policy provides clear guidelines and requirements for transition plans and the roles and responsibilities caseworkers and supervisors must play in the development of the plans. The

policy also outlines steps for reviewing the plan, as well as benchmarks. The policy is available on the DHS website at http://www.dhs.state.or.us/policy/childwelfare/manual_1/i-b235.pdf.

- The **California** Social Work Education Center provides a training program that focuses on the different types of transitions social workers facilitate, including engaging and working with youth after age 18 and extended foster care. It consists of 2 e-learning modules, 1 skills-based classroom module, 1 field activity, and a 200-level knowledge and skills reinforcement classroom lab. This program is available at <https://calswec.berkeley.edu/programs-and-services/child-welfare-service-training-program/common-core-30/transition-block>.
- **Washington State** created two youth-friendly websites detailing the elements of its independent living and transitional living programs, eligibility requirements, and contact information. These resources are available at <http://independence.wa.gov/programs/independent-living-program/> and <http://independence.wa.gov/programs/transitional-living-program/>.

Conclusion

Youth need many things to successfully transition from foster care, such as a job, housing, health care, and personal records. While there are Federal requirements for transition planning, it is important to view this plan as a process that unfolds over time and that allows youth to take the lead rather than as a checklist of items to accomplish. Thankfully, many States have begun taking this approach. Without a comprehensive transition plan they have helped create and buy into, youth may enter the adult world less prepared than their peers who were not in foster care—especially if they leave care without a network of caring adults. They may have difficulty securing living-wage jobs and housing and may lose their social and familial connections (Hook & Courtney, 2010). Transitioning to adulthood can be an emotionally daunting time for youth, but coupling it with aging out of foster care can make the experience more complex and challenging.

While it is important to make sure that every youth that transitions out of care has a home and a work or education plan, it is important to take into account the young person's individual long-term goals and integrate them into the plan. Beginning a youth's transition planning early and breaking the long-term goals into smaller, strengths-based short-term goals make them seem much more manageable to a youth, and such meaningful involvement will increase youth engagement. States are making good progress in their transition-planning efforts, but there is still room for growth. The growing literature on effective programs and practices for transition planning will be an asset as agencies seek to improve outcomes for this vulnerable population.

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