



# Independent Living Services

## ANNUAL REPORT

Department of Children and Families

Office of Child and Family Well-Being

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## Purpose

The Department of Children and Families (Department) provides intentional support and wrap-around services to young adults with lived foster care experience. Florida is proud to offer a comprehensive range of services and resources for youth and young adults transitioning to adulthood from foster care including Extended Foster Care, Postsecondary Education Services and Supports, and Aftercare Services. Through these services and resources, the Department has witnessed the resilience and potential of Florida's youth and young adults transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

This report provides accountability information for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023-2024 on Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) and Aftercare Services (Aftercare), referenced in section 409.1451(6), Florida Statutes (F.S.), as follows:

1. An analysis of performance on the outcome measures developed under this section reported for each community-based care lead agency (lead agency).
2. A description of the Department's oversight of the program, including by the lead agency, any programmatic or fiscal deficiencies found, corrective actions required, and status of compliance.
3. Any rules adopted or proposed under this section since the last report.

Although Extended Foster Care (EFC) is not referenced in s. 409.1451(6), F.S., this report also provides outcome and oversight information for young adults continuing in foster care. The Department recognizes the entire umbrella of Independent Living programs as integral to ensuring the success of our young adults.

### **Postsecondary Education Services and Support**

Eligible young adults ages 18-23 in Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) receive \$1,720 per month and other supports necessary to become self-sufficient pursuant to s. 409.1451, F.S. Eligibility for the program is established based on the young adult's legal custody status at 18 or achieving permanency through adoption or permanent guardianship at age 16 or 17 after a period of placement in licensed care. With the passage of Chapter 2024-177, Laws of Florida (HB 1083), more young adults will be eligible for the benefits of PESS moving forward as the age of permanency through adoption or permanent guardianship has been expanded to include youth who closed to these permanency options at age 14 or 15.

Funding through the federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program) also helps pay for participant housing and other expenses necessary to cover the cost of attendance while enrolled in school or a vocational training program. Initial eligibility requires students to be enrolled in nine credit hours or the vocational equivalent. Students meeting academic progress according to the Florida Bright Futures educational institution may continue to receive the assistance. Some exceptions to credit hours and progress may apply to those students with a diagnosed disability or other recognized challenging circumstances. Services include case management visits, transition, and financial planning.

### **Aftercare Support Services**

Eligible young adults ages 18-23 in Aftercare per s. 409.1451, F.S., receive monetary and service

assistance as they transition to adulthood. Eligibility for Aftercare Services is established through youth being in Department custody at age 18. With the passage of ch. 2024-112, Laws of Florida (SB 564), youth that did not achieve reunification but were in out-of-home care at least six months after turning 14 years of age will also be eligible for Aftercare Services after they turn 18. The services provided are based on a services plan and are intended to be temporary. Services are often used as a bridge to EFC and PESS and may include mentoring, tutoring, mental health, substance abuse, counseling, and financial assistance. Allowable expenses are covered by federal and state funding. Aftercare is an important safety net that provides access to services without full eligibility so that clients can work toward eligibility for more long-term programs with the necessary supports to be successful.

## **Extended Foster Care**

Eligible young adults have the option of remaining in foster care until age 21. If an eligible young adult has a documented disability that prevents full-time participation in a qualifying activity, the young adult may remain in foster care until age 22. EFC is a voluntary program that requires young adults who have aged out of the Department's legal custody, or in licensed care on their 18th birthday, to participate in school, work, or a work training program while residing in a supervised living arrangement as required by federal and state guidelines. Services include regular case management visits, case planning, transition planning, monitoring of life skills development, and judicial oversight. The program utilizes Title IV-E federal funds to help pay for room and board and other allowable expenses such as childcare for young adults who are parenting, clothing for work or school, school supplies, and essential services needed to support the young adult's transition to independence.

## **Contract Oversight**

The Department's contract with lead agencies includes expectations to administer all services for youth in care by federal guidelines, Florida Statutes, Florida Administrative Code, and Operating Procedures. Florida has structured statutory requirements for EFC, PESS, and Aftercare around establishing client eligibility, standards of progress, payment disbursement, and due process and appeals. Requirements in the Florida Administrative Code further detail the framework for how the array of Independent Living services is administered, including application and discharge procedures, transition planning, and documentation requirements.

Contract monitoring for the Independent Living population is carried out in a variety of ways. Pulling data from multiple avenues increases the understanding of effectiveness of services for each outcome area. Most of the work related to this population is carried out by the lead agencies, but each agency has a different structure and implementation method. This leads to a need to monitor overall quality of work by a variety of data points. The Department uses several measurement tools such as quality reviews, data entry, and youth/young adult surveys which can be assessed individually at each lead agency depending on their structure.

## **Office of Quality and Innovation Targeted Reviews**

The Department's Office of Quality and Innovation monitors performance by conducting regular case reviews and evaluating performance metrics. To better support young adults transitioning to adulthood, the Office of Quality and Innovation has collaborated with the Office of Continuing Care to include specific Independent Living questions related to the individual's life and case. To ensure the success of young adults, a post-18 case review was created using the Quality

Standards Review Guide developed by the Quality Standards Workgroup. The workgroup included input from various stakeholders. The first case review was launched in March 2023 and has served as a data collection tool for lead agencies and as a basis for future Department training and curriculum development.

The Office of Quality and Innovation conducted two Independent Living targeted reviews during FY 2023-2024: in December 2023 and June 2024. Between the two reviews a total of 344 cases were reviewed during this year. As these were the first two reviews completed with a sufficient sample size, the review team was able to compare improvement or regression in results. Overall, there were improvements from the first to the second review period with the greatest area being Aftercare Services, which included improvements in all areas assessed. Additionally, improvements were seen in the quality of EFC living arrangements, monitoring academic progress, and providing support for young adults in PESS and assessing and providing for health care needs for young adults across all programs. More detailed data from the report is incorporated into the applicable outcome area sections below. A focus for the upcoming fiscal year is to continue to improve all areas on the quality review which occur twice per year.

### Monthly FSFN Data Reports

Additionally, monthly reports are sent to the lead agencies based on data entered into the Florida Safe Families Network (FSFN). These reports analyze the completion percentages for target areas for each lead agency and determine a statewide completion rate. Reports documenting completion percentage rates for transition planning and life skill assessments for youth ages 16 and 17 have been sent to the lead agencies for over a year. In FY 2023-2024, statewide completion percentages began at 33 percent for life skill assessments completed and improved to 52 percent by the end of the FY. Transition plan meetings completed rose from 60 percent at the beginning of the FY to 74 percent at the end. Reporting on permanent supportive adult connections for young adults ages 18-23 began in January 2024. Completion rates started at 23 percent and ended at 53 percent in June 2024.

The increase in completion rates overall demonstrate that the lead agencies are not only improving compliance on regulatory timeframes but also are utilizing the reports to ensure quality work is being completed with youth in foster care. By the end of FY 2023-2024, reports were also sent for life skill assessments for EFC young adults as a focus area for the next FY. Lead agencies have on demand access to reports for transition planning, young adult receiving services, and permanent adult connections; however, they do not have on demand access to the life skill assessment report. The monthly and on-demand reports continue to improve in accuracy, format, and thoroughness leading to a higher quality of service provided to youth and young adults.

### National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)

In 2010, the Administration for Children and Families established the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), which requires states to comply with two distinct data collection activities:

1. Track the independent living services and supports provided to the youth and/or young adults identified in the state's served population.
2. Collect outcomes information by directly surveying youth and young adults with the NYTD Outcome survey.

Florida's served population is defined as those youth and young adults who are between the ages

of 13-22, who have received at least one independent living service during the six-month federal reporting period, regardless of their foster care status or placement type (a young adult who has reached age 23 is no longer considered part of the served population).

The NYTD Outcome survey was developed by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The survey is part of a longitudinal study that established a “cohort” of young people to survey over a period-of-time. Each NYTD survey cohort is comprised of youth who completed the NYTD survey at age 17 and are again surveyed at age 19 and age 21. The ACF collects outcome information from each cohort across the following six domains: financial self-sufficiency, experience with homelessness, educational attainment, positive connections with adults, high-risk behavior, and access to health insurance.

Since 2010, Florida has reported NYTD Survey Outcomes on three distinct cohorts (youth/young adults who completed the NYTD survey at ages 17, 19, and 21). In 2022-2023, Florida established its fifth NYTD survey group or cohort by surveying youth who are in Florida’s foster care system on their 17th birthday between October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2023. Surveying young adults aged 21 in the NYTD cohort launched October 1, 2023, and will continue through September 2024. Preliminary data shows that 68 percent of young adults obtained a high school diploma while 20 percent had not, only 36 percent reported full time employment, and 32 percent had a period of homelessness. A positive survey outcome is 84 percent of young adults reported a supportive adult in their life which is an outcome that the Department has focused attention on developing. Additional data outcomes from the most recent survey are included in each applicable Outcome Area.

### Financial Accountability

There continues to be a focus on financial accountability for the lead agencies in managing and dispersing the Independent Living budget. The FSFN and eligibility work completed by the field directly impacts the payments, so it is imperative that each department understands the impact the accuracy of their work has. There has been a request by the Council to further understand the impact of Title IV-E reimbursement. The Department will develop guidance for the field in conjunction with the Department’s Office of CBC Financial Accountability to ensure the appropriate information is disseminated.

<b>FY 23-24 GAA</b>	
Independent Living (Recurring Base)	\$ 38,195,652
SB 80/96 Requirements - Rec GR	\$ 1,683,938
IL Case Coordination / Pre-IL Life Skills & Normalcy - Rec GR	\$ 5,710,752
Increase in PESS Monthly Payment - Rec GR	\$ 8,352,000
<b>FY 23-24 Appropriation</b>	<b>\$ 53,942,342</b>

During FY 2023-2024, the Legislature appropriated nearly \$54 million for Independent Living services which was the same as the previous FY. The total appropriation includes the cost of case management associated with the delivery of services to young adults and the supplemental room and board payment to foster care parents for providing independent life skills and normalcy supports to youth ages 13 through 17.

## Independent Living Services Outcomes

Independent Living programs are designed to assist young adults in achieving important milestones as they move toward self-sufficiency. This program review considers the following federal outcome areas: increasing financial self-sufficiency, improving educational attainment, increasing connections to supportive adults, reducing homelessness, reducing high-risk behavior, and improving access to health insurance.

The Department is aware of the challenges in preparing young adults for adulthood and continues its work toward improving service delivery and readiness for youth transitioning to independence. To enhance support for this population and the professionals that serve them, the Department's Youth and Young Adult Services team have continued to provide guidance towards best practice implementation. The focus of the Department continues to be preparation for adulthood and quality Independent Living Program implementation. Addressing life skill assessment and development along with completion of the My Pathways to Success Plan for each youth in care leads to youth being better prepared to enter and take advantage of one of the Independent Living programs at age 18.

The Department has focused on building tools to monitor compliance with program requirements and measure outcomes for the young adults. Monthly reports are sent to lead agencies to monitor compliance with life skill assessments, transition planning, and developing permanent connections, which are all procedural requirements that build positive relationships with youth and young adults. These relationships in turn enhance program engagement of the youth and young adults leading to better outcomes on their journey to self-sufficiency. Quality assurance reviews now include relevant Independent Living specific questions, both within the "Life of Case reviews" and as standalone targeted Independent Living program case review that was launched in March 2023. Further, the Department continues bi-monthly meetings with all Independent Living professionals and hosts an in-person conference twice a year. These meetings continue to focus on improving the program statewide while building a network of professionals throughout the state.

To improve the consistency of statewide service delivery, the Department introduced an Independent Living Specialty Track training curriculum in August 2024. The curriculum includes specialized training to lead agency staff to enhance their understanding of Independent Living requirements, policies, and best practices. The curriculum was finalized during FY 2023-2024 and train the trainer sessions were held throughout the year. By January 2025, eight lead agencies had completed the curriculum with a total of 70 staff trained statewide.

The Department is excited to monitor the impact the curriculum has on program requirements throughout the upcoming year based on the following modules:

- Module 1: Introduction to Independent Living
  - Introduction of content to new Independent Living professionals to provide them with an understanding of services and opportunities for children in care.
  - Provide expert guidance to understanding the role of an Independent Living professional in the lives of children in the child welfare system.
  - Guide learners to understand the relationship between the statutes, rules, and operating procedures that guide their interactions with Florida's children, youths, and young adults.
- Module 2: Independent Living Services for Youth Under 18
  - Provide a deep dive into the services available for eligible youth under 18 years of age who are in the care of the Department.



- Provide expert guidance to understanding the role of a youth and young adult services professional in supporting a youth's transition towards self-sufficiency.
- Direct learners to understand the relationship between the acquisition of life skills and preparing a youth for transitioning to adulthood.
- Module 3: Extended Foster Care
  - Introduction of content to new child welfare professionals to provide them with an understanding of services and opportunities for young adults interested in participating in Extended Foster Care.
  - Provide expert guidance to understanding the role of a young adult services professional in supporting young adult's transition towards self-sufficiency.
  - Direct learners to engage with statutes, rules, and operating procedures related to Extended Foster Care.
- Module 4: PESS and Aftercare
  - Introduction of content to new child welfare professionals to provide them with an understanding of services and opportunities for young adults interested in participating in PESS and Aftercare.
  - Provide expert guidance to understanding the role of a child welfare professional in offering continued support to young adults transitioning towards self-sufficiency.
  - Direct learners to engage with administrative code and statutes related to PESS and Aftercare.
- Module 5: Review and Assessment
  - Final Assessment of Understanding curriculum material.
  - Final activity of review for all material.

Table 1 below illustrates the number of young adults served in each Independent Living program by lead agency during the past two fiscal years. Florida has experienced a 12.5 percent decrease in EFC participation over the last FY. However, there has been a 30.4 percent increase in Aftercare Services participation during the same time. Further, because of the 2020 healthcare emergency, young adults were not to be terminated from EFC due to not engaging in a qualifying activity resulting from Guidance and instruction related to the Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act, Division X of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Public Law (P.L.) 116-260, enacted December 27, 2020, by the Administration for Children and Families. This led to an increased number of young adults in the program who would have typically otherwise been discharged. It is assumed that some of the discrepancy in participation numbers of EFC from FY 2022-2023 to FY 2023-2024 is due to the renewed administration of discharge criteria as it relates to participation in qualifying activity. A young adult may have been allowed to remain in the program but was discharged once program requirements were federally reinstated in 2022.

It should also be noted that most young adults are eligible for all three Independent Living programs. These programs can be utilized fluidly so young adults are able to move between the programs depending on which is most appropriate for them due to their assessed needs at that time. Some young adults may be counted more than once in the FY data as they could have been served by multiple programs throughout the year. Overall, there was minimal difference in young adults served statewide amongst all programs between the past two FYs.



Table 1: Young Adults Receiving Independent Living Services by Program Type, Lead Agency, and FY

Lead Agency	2022-23			2023-24		
	Aftercare	EFC	PESS	Aftercare	EFC	PESS
CBC of Brevard (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of May 2024)	27	104	11	15	59	17
ChildNet Inc	24	166	112	41	142	112
ChildNet Palm Beach	11	118	62	27	116	61
Childrens Network Hillsborough	57	146	60	79	99	49
Childrens Network of SW Florida	8	65	34	5*	32	61
Citrus Health Network	48	269	186	127	247	153
Community Partnership for Children	16	76	47	16	53	55
Communities Connected for Kids	11	28	26	13	29	23
Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/1/2024)	38	145	57	N/A	N/A	N/A
Family Partnerships Central Florida (combined for Embrace and CBC of Brevard as of 5/1/2024)	N/A	N/A	N/A	45	165	81
Family Support Services North Florida	23	107	31	18	96	33
FSS Suncoast	49	105	55	54	100	54
Heartland for Children	37	91	29	36	82	41
Kids Central Inc	54	54	39	51	65	39
Kids First of Florida Inc	0	27	13	2	17	14
NWF Health Network-East	19	67	27	16	78	30
NWF Health Network-West	11	100	19	25	89	22
Partnership for Strong Families	6	16	5	20*	22	7
Safe Children Coalition	29	37	16	19	38	19
St Johns County Commission	0	12	8	0	11	8
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>1,733</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>1,540</b>	<b>879</b>

\*\*Source: OCWDRU #1089, FSN Data Repository

\*These counts were self-reported by the lead agency due to FSN data reporting issues

## Outcome Area 1: Improving Educational Attainment

Education plays a vital role in fostering personal growth and self-sufficiency. Young adults who obtain an education are better prepared to face the uncertainties of the future job market. A high school and/or college diploma not only increases their chances of securing employment but may also open doors to higher-paying jobs and more opportunities for career advancement. Education equips individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to navigate the complexities of the modern world. It instills critical thinking skills and the ability to adapt to new challenges.

To emphasize the importance of education, the Department has enhanced its focus on both secondary and postsecondary education outcomes through the Young Adult Receiving Services Report (YARS). This report tracks the educational progress and achievements of young adults who receive services from the Department and lead agencies. By gathering real-time data on education, the Department can assess the effectiveness of programs and interventions in

promoting educational success.

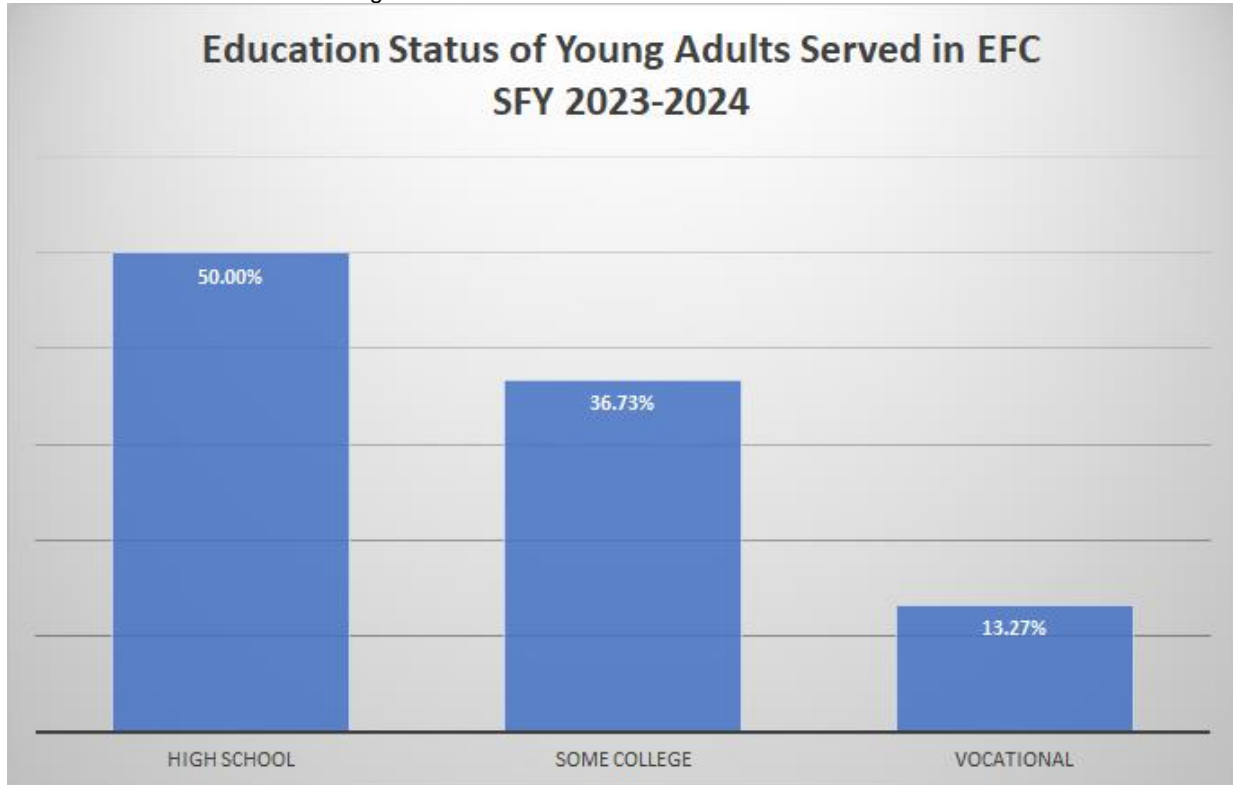
Table 2 displays the number of young adults who have achieved a high school diploma or GED in the past two state fiscal years by lead agency. By enhancing its focus on education outcomes, providing educational experiences, and tracking progression, the Department has seen a 50 percent increase in high school diploma attainment compared to the previous fiscal year.

Table 2. Young Adults who have a High School Diploma, GED Certificate, or Certificate of Completion

LEAD AGENCY	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Brevard Family Partnership (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/1/2024)	19	30	N/A
ChildNet-Broward	60	110	125
ChildNet-Palm Beach	30	54	84
Children’s Network of SW Florida	36	21	71
Citrus Health Network	73	207	206
Communities Connected for Kids	17	4	3
Community Partnership for Children	24	18	15
Family Support Services- Suncoast	81	71	75
Children’s Network Hillsborough	39	83	81
Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/1/2024)	66	99	N/A
Family Partnerships Central Florida (combined for Embrace and CBC of Brevard)	N/A	N/A	141
NWF Health Network – West (Previously known as Families First Network)	24	53	56
Family Integrity Program	2	8	8
Family Support Services of North Florida	31	31	26
Heartland for Children	32	20	38
Kids Central, Inc.	19	33	38
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	4	9	5
Northwest Florida Health Network-East	27	58	54
Partnership for Strong Families	19	8	9
Safe Children Coalition	27	25	35
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>630</b>	<b>942</b>	<b>1,070</b>

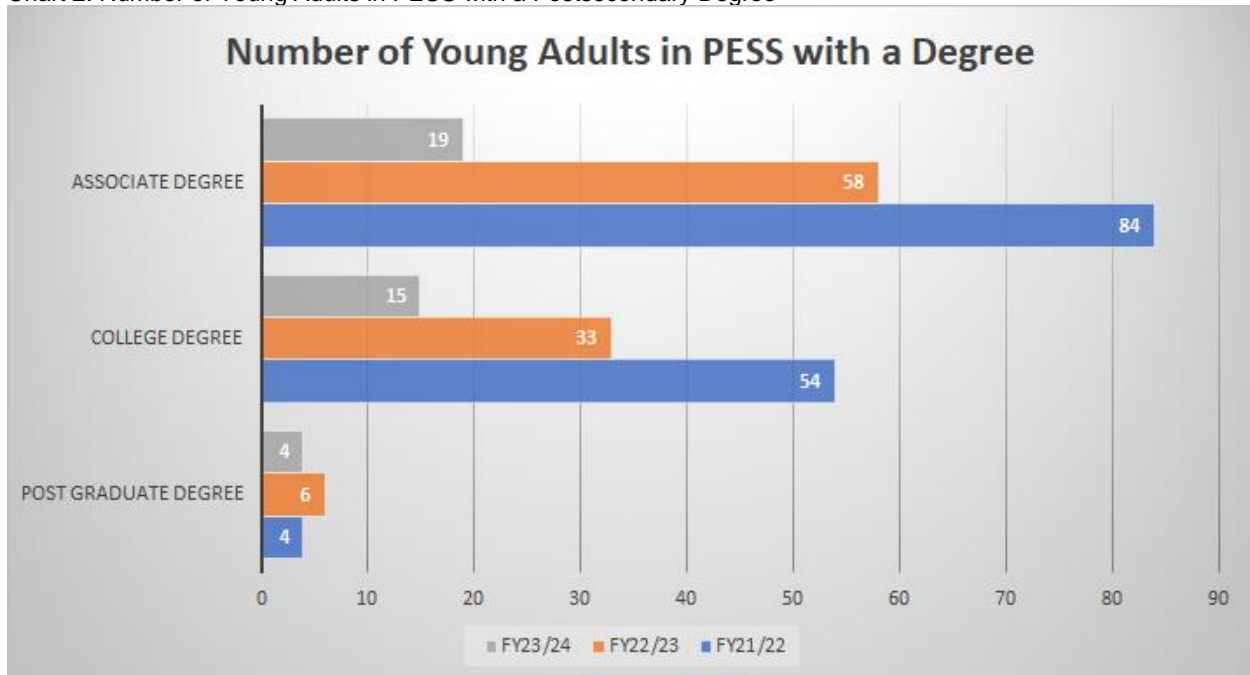
Chart 1 indicates the proportion of young adults participating in EFC services and their present educational status. During FY 2023-2024, 50 percent were actively pursuing a high school degree, while 50 percent were pursuing postsecondary education. It should be noted that there are some young adults that opt to remain in EFC as the academic requirements for EFC are less than those enrolled in PESS. Additionally, some young adults are eligible for EFC and not PESS due to the six months of licensed care requirement.

Chart 1: Education Status of Young Adults Served in EFC FY 2023-24



While overall educational attainment across programs has increased, there has been a decrease in educational attainment in the state’s PESS program. Chart 2 reflects the number of young adults enrolled in the PESS program who have successfully obtained a postsecondary or graduate degree in the past two FYs. There has been a significant decline in the number of young adults obtaining a degree this FY despite the statewide enrollment in the program remaining about the same. The Department believes this decline could partially be attributed to a data entry issue and will be looking further into the matter to correct as appropriate. In addition, there was a data field change within the education record mid-year that has resulted in reporting discrepancies. The Youth and Young Adult Services team is available to provide training to the lead agencies to correct the data entry to ensure future reporting accurately reflects the young adult’s educational attainment. Training will occur during FY 2024-2025 through a virtual webinar as well as adding the discussion to the IL Specialty Track Curriculum. The Department is also reviewing how to create education-related alerts within our pending technology modernization system to ensure accuracy.

Chart 2: Number of Young Adults in PESS with a Postsecondary Degree



Results of the targeted Independent Living Review by the Office of Quality and Innovation determined that of cases reviewed in July 2024, 79 percent of young adults in PESS were on track to graduate with a postsecondary degree or certificate by the time they turned 23. This was an increase from the 73 percent of young adults on track of cases reviewed in December 2023.

Preliminary 2023 data from the NYTD surveys completed by young adults ages 21 with foster care experience shows that 68 percent of young adults reported receiving a high school diploma/GED, 7 percent obtained some sort of postsecondary education, and 20 percent had obtained neither.

Per s. 409.1452, F.S., the Department is required to collaborate with the State University System (SUS), Florida College System (FCS), and the Department of Education to improve outcomes and career transitions for former foster youth who are eligible for the Department's Tuition and Fee Exemption. In FY 2023-2024, the Department continued its contract with Educate Tomorrow Corporation, a 501(c)(3) organization, which started to administer the Positive Pathways Program in 2016. The program's staff coordinates and develops a network of postsecondary supports and hosts monthly network calls with representatives from colleges, universities, and lead agencies in Florida. Positive Pathways also conducted meetings in each region last year to raise awareness among professionals about the tuition exemptions available to young adults. This unique network currently has over 300 members comprised of post-secondary institution staff, community supports, and lead agency representatives. In FY 2023-2024, Positive Pathways provided over 230 instances of technical assistance to network members and the young adults they serve. The annual conference in Gainesville held in June 2024 had 87 people in attendance to receive additional support and training. Over 2,700 students utilizing the DCF Tuition Exemption were served by campus-based programs in academic year 2023 (data is received one year behind SFY). Positive Pathways support of these campus-based programs has a direct link to the young

adults working to achieve success with post-secondary education.

Data is received from the SUS and FCS for the previous academic year which does not align with the State Fiscal Year. Table 3 displays the number of young adults utilizing the tuition exemption form for 2022-2023 academic year based on their eligibility status. A total of 380 young adults utilizing the tuition exemption obtained a postsecondary education for the 2022-2023 academic year. Table 4 displays the breakdown of young adults who successfully completed a postsecondary degree for the 2022-2023 academic year based on their tuition exemption eligibility status.

Table 3: Number of young adults utilizing tuition exemption for 2022-23 academic year (academic year data is reported a year behind SFY)

	SUS	FCS	Total
<b>Department Custody (Aged Out)</b>	291	1,530	1,821
<b>Adopted</b>	995	1,906	2,901
<b>Caregiver Custody</b>	295	302	597
			<b>5,319</b>

\*Source: Florida Department of Education, April 2024 Briefing on Florida College System Outcomes

Table 4: number of young adults successfully completing a post-secondary award for 2022-23 academic year (academic year data is reported a year behind SFY)

	Associate in Arts Degree	Associate in Science Degree	Baccalaureate Degree	Career Certificate	College Credit Certificates
<b>Department Custody (Aged Out)</b>	78	18	15	12	32
<b>Adopted</b>	103	21	21	20	38
<b>Caregiver Custody</b>	22	*	*	*	*
<b>Total</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>70</b>

Note: An \* indicates that values ranged between 1 and 9 and information has been masked to protect student privacy

Source: Florida Department of Education, April 2024 Briefing on Florida College System Outcomes

## Outcome Area 2: Increasing Connections

The Department recognizes the significance of building strong relationships between caring adults and young adults in Independent Living Programs. These connections play a vital role in helping young individuals achieve their goals and overcome obstacles. Feedback from youth voice councils have highlighted the profound and lasting impact of these relationships; therefore, the Department actively promotes the use of peer connections. Local lead agencies and their providers have increased the employment of young adults who, through their shared lived experience, build relationships with their peers and support them during their transition to adulthood. In addition, the Department provides resources to foster the development of supportive relationships for lead agencies. The enhanced My Pathway to Success Plan and statewide training initiatives place a strong emphasis on the significance of adult support networks and mentors. To facilitate the process of finding mentors and creating positive connections for staff and young adults, facilitator guides were created, including a specific section dedicated to identifying and fostering supportive adults. In instances where no supportive adults are available, a documented plan must be formulated outlining the steps required to find a mentor or establish

a lasting positive connection as they transition into adulthood.

To continue to support young adults, s. 409.1451(5)(b), F.S., requires lead agencies to attempt to contact each young adult who has aged out of foster care that is not currently active in an Independent Living program at least annually. The purpose of this contact is to provide information on programs they may be eligible for, provide information on support provided by the Office of Continuing Care, and to inquire as to any needs they may have which can be resolved by another program. This annual contact is another level of the Department ensuring that young adults have opportunities to increase connections to supportive adults.

The implementation of the new YARS report has also facilitated the collection of data on permanent connections. This report gathers valuable information about these connections, enabling effective data collection and evaluation for future reporting. The Department began reporting completion rates to lead agencies in January 2024 as to how many young adults had permanent connections entered in FSFN; lead agencies have on demand access to this report as well. The information on these connections should be gathered during home visits, Transition Planning, case planning, and any other contact with the young adults. The permanent connection (specific person, role, and contact information) is then entered into FSFN. The percentages are reflective of how many young adults have a permanent connection entered in FSFN. At the start of this tracking in January 2024, the statewide average was 23 percent. However, through the diligence of the lead agencies not only identifying these supportive adults but documenting such in FSFN, by June 2024 the statewide average had increased to 53 percent.

During completion of the NYTD surveys, data is collected regarding the youth/young adult's self-reporting of an adult in their life to whom they can go to for advice or emotional support. Preliminary data from the FY 2023-2024 NYTD cohort found that 84 percent of young adults surveyed report they do have a supportive adult. Developing and maintaining a permanent supportive adult connection for every youth that leaves Department custody will continue to be a focus for Youth and Young Adult Services through early discussion utilizing the My Pathways to Success Plan beginning at age 16, identifying a mentor if there is not one, and consistently monitoring this through age 23 by NYTD and monthly data reports.

### Outcome Area 3: Increasing Financial Self-Sufficiency

An overarching goal of all Independent Living programs is to increase the young adult's self-sufficiency which is largely accomplished by improving their financial security, assessing their financial literacy, improving employability, ensuring available transportation, and reducing reliance on public assistance.

The importance of financial responsibility of young adults receiving a PESS stipend is underscored by s. 409.1451, F.S.; therefore, before a participant can receive funding, a financial plan assessing the young adult's financial literacy, executive functioning, and self-regulation must be developed to include discussion on their financial management, budgeting, and savings. This financial plan is incorporated into the My Pathways to Success Plan and reviewed every six months in collaboration with the young adult. If opportunities for improvement are identified, the young adult is provided referrals or necessary information to enhance the identified skills. Results of the targeted Independent Living Review by the Office of Quality and Innovation determined that, of cases reviewed in July 2024, 62 percent of PESS recipients had the financial assessment completed and 35 percent had the plan reviewed every six months.

Employment is one of the biggest ways a young adult can increase their financial self-sufficiency. While none of the Independent Living programs solely require employment, all encourage it as employment will positively impact the young adult in many areas. Table 4 presents lead agency data on the count of young adults involved in the EFC program who have been employed in the past two FYs. This data is reflective of a young adult that is employed at some period, regardless of their qualifying activity for EFC. Recent data suggests that more program participants are choosing to pursue secondary education as the activity that qualifies them for the program as represented by the increase in secondary degree obtainment. Consequently, there has been a slight decline in the number of young adults in the program who have reported employment compared to the previous FY.

Table 4. Number of Young Adults in EFC with a Recorded Period of Employment

Lead Agency	2022-23	2023-24
Brevard Family Partnership (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/1/2024)	18	N/A
ChildNet-Broward	26	29
ChildNet-Palm Beach	6	12
Children’s Network of SW Florida	14	14
Citrus Health Network	75	59
Communities Connected for Kids	3	5
Community Partnership for Children	1	2
Family Support Services- Suncoast	24	16
Children’s Network Hillsborough	44	20
Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnership of Central Florida as of 5/1/2024)	59	N/A
Family Partnerships of Central Florida	N/A	73
Northwest Florida Health Network-West (Formerly Families First Network)	51	48
Family Integrity Program	9	5
Family Support Services of North Florida	33	27
Heartland for Children	28	17
Kids Central, Inc.	3	11
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	8	8
Northwest Florida Health Network-East	18	21
Partnership for Strong Families	3	5
Safe Children Coalition	13	23
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>436</b>	<b>395</b>
Source: OCWDRU #1169, FSFN Data Repository		

Table 5 below provides the number of young adults who received Aftercare for the previous two FY’s and had a recorded period of employment. The number of young adults who have recorded employment in Aftercare has increased 19 percent from the previous FY. Although young adults are not required to seek employment or attend school as an ongoing condition for eligibility in Aftercare, they must make efforts to complete activities to become self-sufficient. These types of



activities, as part of the recently updated Aftercare Services Plan, will assist with transitioning the young adult toward financial self-sufficiency.

Table 5. Number of Young Adults in Aftercare with a Recorded Period of Employment

Lead Agency	2022-23	2023-24
Brevard Family Partnership (now Family Partnerships of Central Florida)	9	10
ChildNet-Broward	5	5
ChildNet-Palm Beach	0	2
Children’s Network of SW Florida	5	0
Citrus Health Network	22	41
Communities Connected for Kids	0	2
Community Partnership for Children	0	2
Family Support Services- Suncoast	2	10
Family Partnerships of Central Florida (combined Brevard Family Partnership and Embrace Families as of 5/1/24)	N/A	17
Children’s Network Hillsborough	5	25
Embrace Families (now Family Partnerships of Central Florida)	21	N/A
Northwest Florida Health Network-West (formerly Families First Network)	31	13
Family Integrity Program	2	0
Family Support Services of North Florida	5	6
Heartland for Children	11	10
Kids Central, Inc.	1	4
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	8	0
Northwest Florida Health Network-East	0	2
Partnership for Strong Families	0	0
Safe Children Coalition	4	7
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>156</b>
Source: OCWDRU #1169, FSFN Data Repository		

Preliminary data from the current NYTD survey notes that only 36 percent of young adults reported full time employment and 27 percent part time employment. It is worth noting that, through the surveys, approximately 8 percent of young adults reported receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

### Step into Success Workforce Education and Internship Pilot Program

Section 409.1455, F.S., was created and titled the “Step into Success Act”. The program was passed by the Legislature as a three-year pilot for the purpose of giving eligible foster youth and former foster youth an opportunity to learn and develop essential workforce and professional skills, to transition from the custody of the Department to independent living, and to become better prepared for an independent and successful future. The first cohort started in May 2024 with 15 participants local to the Tallahassee area.

The Office of Continuing Care, within the Department, in consultation with subject-matter experts and the lead agencies, are legislatively mandated to develop and administer the pilot program for

interested foster youth and former foster youth. Step into Success is a pilot program for foster youth alumni ages 16 to 26.

There are two components to the Step into Success program. The first component is workforce education training, which is an interactive, youth focused, in-person training. Participants will learn important professional development and life skills such as resume building, interview skills, professionalism, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, conflict resolution in the workplace, financial literacy, and more. The second component is a workforce internship experience, which consists of an onsite internship for a minimum of 80 hours a month for up to one year. Interns receive a stipend of \$1,517.00 a month as well as a one-time \$500.00 clothing stipend to purchase uniforms or internship attire needed. Interns must be 18 years old to be eligible for the workforce experience. Each participant must complete the workforce education training to be eligible for the workforce internship experience as well as meet any other requirements outlined in the Step into Success Act.

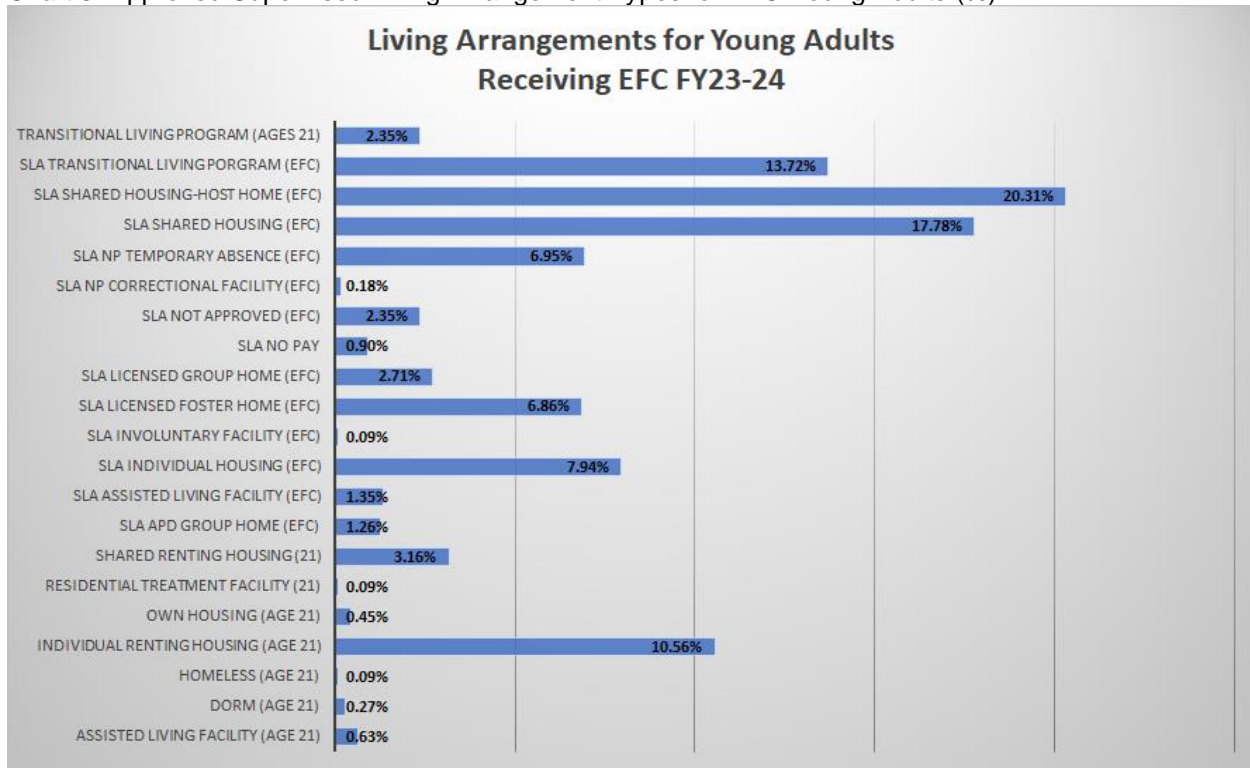
The annual outcomes required by s. 409.1455(11), F.S., on the progress of the Step into Success program is attached as Appendix A to this report.

#### Outcome Area 4: Reducing Homelessness

Ensuring that young adults have a safe and stable home is crucial for them to become self-sufficient. When the housing needs of young adults are met, they can better focus on achieving their goals. Young adults in the EFC program collaborate with their Independent Living team to identify a safe and appropriate place to live and enter a Supervised Living Arrangement. Before the living arrangement is approved, child welfare professionals use the standardized Supervised Living Arrangement Assessment to assess the suitability of the living environment. This assessment for EFC ensures that young adults are placed in the most appropriate housing option for their unique needs. The available housing options include Transitional Living Programs, Shared Renting Housing, Residential Treatment Facilities, Own Housing, Military Housing, Individual Renting Housing, Homeless, Dormitories, Detention, and Assisted Living Facilities.

Chart 3 below displays usage of the types of approved living arrangement types of young adults enrolled in EFC for FY 2023-2024.

Chart 3. Approved Supervised Living Arrangement Types for EFC Young Adults (%)



If young adults are discharged from the EFC program due to noncompliance with eligibility requirements, Aftercare Services can provide them an opportunity back into the program and prevent homelessness while they are not enrolled in EFC. Young adults who are eligible for Aftercare Services and become homeless can request emergency services. If requested, action is taken to meet their needs within 24 hours. This rapid response is imperative, as it will ensure that the temporary crisis does not result in long-term homelessness or further destabilization. Additionally, a goal of the young adult's Aftercare Services plan can be to reenter EFC requiring assistance in establishing a qualifying activity or finding an approved living arrangement.

While there are no restrictions on housing for young adults in PESS, stable housing is still critical to their success in the program. The financial assessment required for PESS recipients is to determine if their housing expenses need to be paid from their stipend directly instead of automatically dispersing the full amount to the young adult. This is an effort to ensure they have secure housing so they can focus on their education. PESS recipients often have struggles finding affordable housing with the fixed income of a PESS stipend and seek out alternative funding sources to cover any difference, like financial aid or earned income.

The targeted Independent Living reviews completed by the Office of Quality and Innovation assess several areas surrounding reducing homelessness for all three programs. In EFC, there is an assumption that the young adult is not homeless as there is a level of responsibility for the lead agency to identify an approved placement. In the most recent June 2024 review, 58 percent of supervised living arrangements were assessed properly, 62 percent had adequate Shared Living

Plans completed (which outline expectations of placement), and 100 percent of cases ensured the placement met the young adult's level of need to approve the placement.

While PESS and Aftercare do not have a requirement to approve the young adult's living arrangement, there is a burden to ensure secure housing. The June 2024 targeted review found that 100 percent of Aftercare cases had sufficient efforts to ensure housing resources were identified which had improved from 83 percent on the previous review. For PESS, 93 percent of cases had efforts to ensure sufficient housing was obtained for the young adult which was a 2 percent increase from the previous review.

The Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative allows for young adults ages 18-24 who left foster care or will leave foster care in 90 days and are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless access to the Housing Choice Voucher assistance available through Public Housing Agencies (PHA) in partnership with Public Child Welfare Agencies. The young adult is eligible for housing assistance through the voucher for up to 36 months but may be extended for an additional 24 months if they are with supportive case management services through an agency. There are some regions throughout the state that have been able to establish a strong partnership with their local PHA to implement the voucher process; however, there are many areas that still do not have access to these vouchers for the young adults.

There are significant challenges regarding housing for this population in the access and understanding of the Fostering Youth to Independence (FYI) housing vouchers: lack of training and support for housing providers working with a unique population, need for development of new partnerships with housing providers, the lack of sharing resources across regions, and lack of a centralized housing database.

Over the last year, the Department has held monthly meetings with several lead agencies along with the executive director of the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare to help eliminate barriers to accessing the vouchers. At least one lead agency has been able to establish a partnership with the local PHA to begin issuing the vouchers. This effort has also led to Housing Specialist positions being offered by the Department to three lead agencies as a pilot program beginning in November 2024 to increase the accessibility of the vouchers as well as eliminate other barriers to housing for young adults in Independent Living programs.

For the most recent NYTD survey, the preliminary data shows that 32 percent of young adults report a period of homelessness in last 2 years. For purposes of the NYTD survey, homelessness was defined as having no regular or adequate place to live to include living in a car, "couch surfing," living on the street, or staying in a homeless shelter.

## Outcome Area 5: Reducing High-Risk Behavior

Perhaps the most effective way child welfare professionals can assist with mitigating high-risk behavior of young adults is through frequency and quality of contact. Independent Living Specialists at the lead agencies complete monthly home visits for young adults in EFC while frequency of contact with young adults in Aftercare and PESS is largely based on their assessed needs. Specialists take this opportunity to communicate with the young adult about their challenges, successes, education, employment, life skill needs and development, housing status, supportive adults, and any other service needs the young adult may have. Increasing these areas with the young adult will reduce the likelihood of engagement in high-risk behaviors.

Monthly home visits for EFC are a critical component of the program that the young adult is expected to engage in. The June 2024 targeted Independent Living Quality Review found the visits were of sufficient quality in 86 percent of the cases and occurred to the required level of frequency in 70 percent of the cases. A quality visit is described to accurately assess progress on the transition plan and case plan, service needs, life skills attainment, and living arrangement. As EFC home visits are an important support for young adults, the Department will focus on this measure improving throughout the next FY. With the implementation of the IL Specialty Track Curriculum and continued Quality Reviews, this should increase quality and frequency of home visits. Strategies on using available reporting tools to monitor home visit completion will also be presented to lead agencies during bi-monthly statewide conference calls and bi-annual in-person training opportunities.

There is no minimum contact requirement for PESS; however, it should be at least every six months to complete the financial plan. Most young adults welcome and benefit from more frequent contact. The June 2024 targeted Independent Living review found that 69 percent of cases had sufficient contact with the young adult to ensure needs and services were identified, while 61 percent of cases had sufficient efforts to ensure the young adult was provided the opportunity for life skill development.

For Aftercare Services, there is no requirement for contact; however, the Aftercare Services Plan must be updated with the young adult every three months for services to continue. As Aftercare is intended to be a short-term program, it is imperative that contact be frequent to implement the required services. The June 2024 Quality Review found that contact was sufficient to ensure services were provided in 90 percent of the cases which was an increase from 58 percent in the previous review. Further, the plans were reviewed 75 percent of the time which was an increase from 30 percent in the previous review.

Additionally, by providing access to community services, the Office of Continuing Care Hope Line serves as a statewide point of contact for young adults in Aftercare, EFC, and PESS. Participants can access a peer support system and existing community resources until the age of 26, creating a safety net for those with high-risk behaviors. Overall, these programs offer comprehensive support and resources to young adults as they transition into adulthood.

A critical component of identifying and preventing high-risk behaviors is the wraparound model style of the My Pathways to Success Plan. This written document is the product of a meeting led by the youth and young adults with their supportive adults at the table. The Plan is intended to be a holistic approach to identifying strengths, developing needs, assessing life skill competency, creating supportive adult connections, and creating a comprehensive plan for the youth in areas such as education, employment, healthcare, and financial literacy. Involving the youth in these discussions beginning at age 16 and continuing with the same plan through age 23 creates a plan for the youth and young adults to reach their goal reducing the likelihood they will engage in high-risk behaviors.

The Department has been monitoring completion rates of the plans for well over a year through monthly reporting completion from FSFN. Through additional oversight and reporting mechanisms, the lead agencies have increased the completion of the plans throughout FY 2023-2024 from 60 percent to 74 percent. The frequency and thoroughness of these plans being completed with the youth and young adult are critical in establishing rapport, developing permanent connections with supportive adults, creating a plan for achieving short- and long-term goals, and moving towards self-sufficiency.

## Outcome Area 6: Access to Health Insurance

To make sure that youth and young adults in Independent Living receive necessary health and medical services, the Department collects important health information including medical, dental, and vision records, and other crucial data from the My Pathway to Success Plan. By analyzing this information, caseworkers can now identify any early issues or problems and plan interventions accordingly. The Department's continuous real-time data on the health and well-being of young adults in the Road to Independence and EFC programs will enable better monitoring and understanding of their overall health outcomes and needs.

The Office of Quality and Innovation also evaluates each program to determine if sufficient efforts were made to assess for the healthcare needs of the young adult and then to provide for the needs. For EFC, needs were assessed in 90 percent of cases while 85 percent had those needs addressed; both areas were improvements from the previous review. In PESS cases, efforts to provide for identified healthcare needs occurred in 64 percent of cases which was a slight reduction from the previous review. Aftercare Services assesses if efforts were made to address the needs of the young adult which includes healthcare; this occurred in 74 percent of cases reviewed which was a significant increase from the previous review.

Young adults who age out at 18 in Department custody and were receiving Medicaid are eligible for it to continue until they turn 26. Most young adults maintain enrollment with Sunshine Health in the Child Welfare Specialty Plan (CWSP) until they turn 21. Young adults are continuously made aware of the Sunshine Health CWSP benefits through the assigned primary worker, their Sunshine Care Manager, and through transition planning when healthcare is discussed. The CWSP opens the following benefits to assist with improving well-being and transitioning to self-sufficiency:

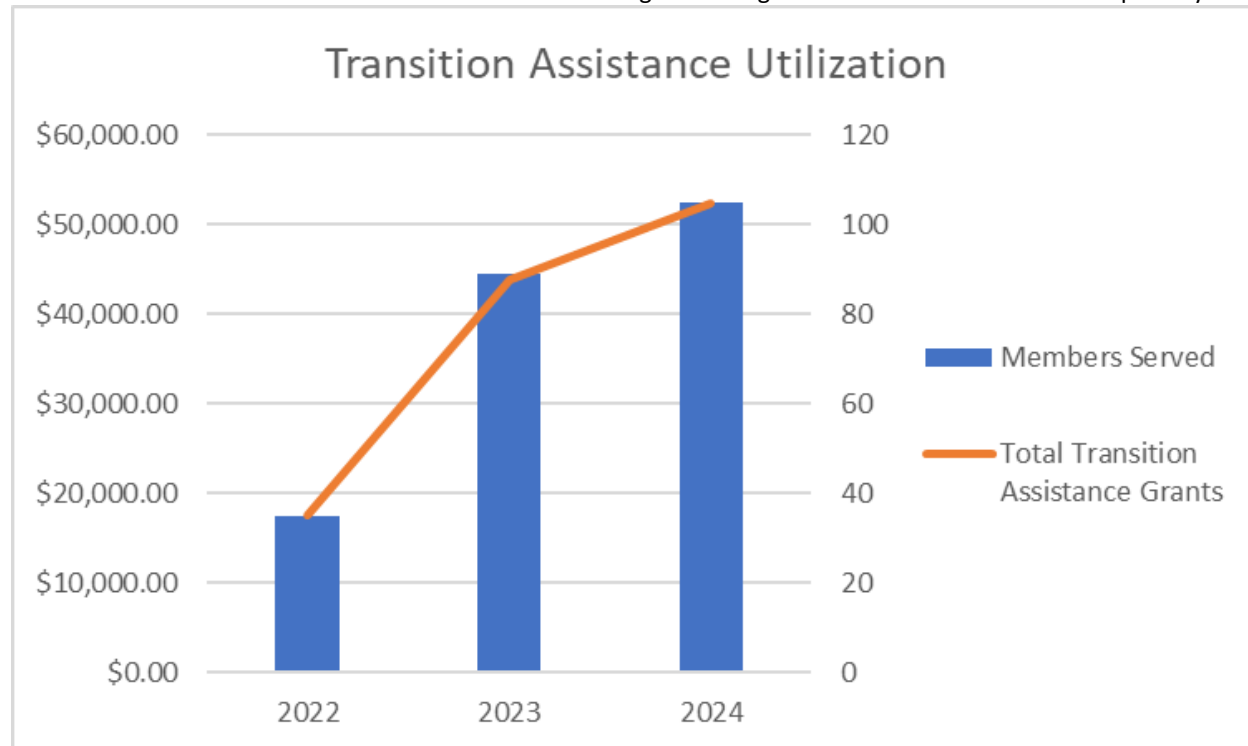
- Specialized Care Management
- Targeted transition planning in coordination with the lead agencies to address healthcare needs and social determinants of health (housing, education, employment)
- Training/workshops for youth related to accessing healthcare as they transition.
- Partnerships and coordination with agencies/programs serving transitional independent living youth throughout the state.
- Care Grants – up to \$150 per year per youth for services or supplies including social or physical activities such as gym memberships, swimming lessons, sports equipment or supplies, art supplies, and application fees for post-high school educational needs.
- Transition Assistance Funds – a one-time payment of up to \$500 per young adult transitioning out of foster care or EFC between the ages of 18-21 which can be used toward services and items such as rental deposits, utility services, or household supplies (i.e., linens, appliances, furniture).

Sunshine Health Child Welfare Specialty Plan serves about 2,000 young adults each fiscal year. Between 2023 and 2024 year-to-date, Care Grant utilization increased 50 percent providing this expanded benefit to over 1,000 members for all of Sunshine Health enrollees. For members between the ages of 18 and 21, there were 94 Care Grants issued during FY 2023-2024. The benefit amount paid out to these members is just under \$16,500.



Since 2022, 229 young adults have received Transition Assistance through Sunshine Health. Between 2022 and 2024 year-to-date, utilization has increased 200 percent. In FY 2023-24, 114 members received Transitional Assistance with a total of \$56,678.13 dispersed in this expanded benefit.

Chart 4. Utilization of Transition Assistance Grant for Young Adults Eligible for Sunshine Child Welfare Specialty Plan



\*Source: Sunshine Health

Youth and young adults over the age of 18 years of age who are eligible for Medicaid in other states are eligible to transfer their Medicaid to Florida, and Florida young adults are eligible to transfer their Medicaid to other states. In Florida, if a young adult from another state wishes to apply for Medicaid, then they only need to self-attest that they are a former foster youth to continue Medicaid enrollment status in Florida.

## Supports and Services

### Office of Continuing Care

The Department recognizes that the transition into adulthood can be difficult for young people. For current and former foster youth, it can be even more difficult without an existing support system. In October 2021, The Office of Continuing Care, part of Hope Florida – A Pathway to Prosperity, was established to offer free, one-on-one help for young people between the ages of 18-26 who are about to or have recently transitioned out of foster care, aiming to make the leap into adulthood a positive experience. The Office of Continuing Care provides the following services for young adults: connection to existing resources in their area to help them thrive as an independent young adult, assists in accessing special services available to them, and gives a support system to help them with the next steps on their path to adulthood.

During FY 2023-2024, there were 532 cases received through OCC that were reviewed for the



primary needs of tuition waiver eligibility, independent living program eligibility, and ESS eligibility and assistance.

Between July 2023 and June 2024, there were 334 total cases reviewed for tuition waiver eligibility. Of these, 242 individuals were deemed eligible for tuition waivers. Of those who were ineligible, 50 cases had no record in the FSFN, 14 were related to reunifications, 25 had no associated dependency cases, and three cases were ruled ineligible based on Florida Statutes. For Independent Living programs, 156 cases were reviewed. Of these, 112 individuals were found eligible for IL services, while 44 were ineligible. The reasons for ineligibility included 27 cases with no record, eight cases involving reunifications, seven cases with no dependency case, one case ineligible due to Florida Statutes, and one case involving the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC).

A total of 42 cases were reviewed for ESS eligibility and assistance. Of these, 23 clients received assistance with SNAP benefits including case reopening's, benefit increases, and EBT card replacements. Seven clients were provided with Medicaid support ranging from benefit confirmations to assistance with reapplying. Two clients were found ineligible for benefits, with reasons such as work sanctions or missing documentation. Additionally, seven clients were advised to reapply or submit additional information to continue or reopen their cases. Contact was lost with three clients.

### Child and Family Well-Being Council, Youth Subcommittee

Providing a platform for youth and young adults to engage with the Department and other relevant stakeholders, provide valuable feedback and insight into like policy and improvement recommendations and other sources of support are critically important and the Department is committed to providing an easily accessible way to support this. The Department established a Youth Subcommittee within the Child and Family Well-Being Council as of May 2023. This subcommittee creates a space for a youth-led, self-standing body comprised of Youth and Young Adults with Lived Experience to provide feedback and expertise on topics and discussions from the Child and Family Well-Being Council in addition to topics deemed necessary by the youth. The membership currently consists of youth from One Voice Impact, Florida Youth SHINE, and the GAL CHAMPIONS statewide youth advocacy groups in addition to several at-large youth representatives from the community. The Department has provided extensive presentations to this group from legislative updates to listening sessions on policy implementations and high-level discussions with Department leadership. Additionally, the body is run and facilitated by the Department's Youth Advisor, who has lived experience, to ensure the group is entirely youth-led.

This platform allows the Department to keep youth and young adults with lived experience at the forefront of policy and practice decisions and has seen several successes in providing youth feedback since its inception in May 2023. This body ensures lived experience is incorporated into all aspects of the Department and is a consistent avenue to solicit feedback from subject matter experts.

## Appeals

Young adults applying for or receiving Independent Living services through EFC, PESS, or Aftercare have the right to receive notice of adverse action and to resolve issues of program eligibility through the fair hearing process under s. 39.6251(9) and 409.1451(4), F.S. The Office of Appeal Hearings reported that there were no appeals granted in FY 2022-2023, upholding the

program's eligibility determinations made by lead agencies.

Table 6. Number of Fair Hearing Appeals for Independent Living Programs

Program Type	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Extended Foster Care	3	3	27
PESS	Not available*	Not available*	12
Aftercare Services	Not available*	Not available*	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>40</b>

Source: DCF Office of Inspector General

\*Previous reporting years did not capture fair hearings for PESS and Aftercare. This information was collected beginning in FY 2023-2024.

Of the 40 appeals in FY 2023-2024, 21 were withdrawn, 14 were abandoned, and five were denied (Department's action was upheld).

## Rule Promulgation

During FY 2023-2024, there were no administrative rules adopted that relate to the Independent Living population. However, s. 409.1455, F.S., allowed the Department to adopt rules related to the Step into Success Program. These rules will be developed at the end of the three-year pilot program after sufficient information collection has occurred that would best guide and support policy implementation.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Step Into Success Workforce Education and Internship Pilot Program

Complete report of annual outcomes for the program per s. 409.1455(11), F.S.

### Appendix B: Job Descriptions for Interns participating in Step into Success Pilot Program

Available job descriptions for interns participating in the program to meet requirements of s. 409.1455(11)f, F.S.