



Independent Living Services Advisory Council 2025 Annual Report

Taylor Hatch
Secretary

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Governor

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Background

The Independent Living Services Advisory Council (“ILSAC” or “Council”) was established by the Florida Legislature pursuant to sections 39.6251 and 409.1451, Florida Statutes (F.S.), to review, assess, and make recommendations regarding the implementation and operation of the Extended Foster Care (EFC) program and the Road-to-Independence (RTI) programs. RTI programs include Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) and Aftercare Services. Together, these programs are intended to support young adults transitioning from foster care by promoting permanency, self-sufficiency, and successful transitions to adulthood, consistent with legislative intent.

Under section 39.6251, F.S., the Extended Foster Care program establishes eligibility requirements, qualifying activities, and judicial oversight intended to support young adults ages 18–21 who voluntarily remain in foster care while completing education, employment, or other approved activities. Section 409.1451, F.S., further requires the Department to administer RTI programs and to report on outcomes for young adults formerly in foster care across key life domains, including education, employment, housing, health, financial stability, transportation, well-being, and permanent connections.

In accordance with its statutory role, the Council is required to assess the implementation and operation of EFC and RTI programs and to advise the Department on actions that would improve the ability of program services to meet established statutory goals. This annual report documents the Council’s findings, analyses, and recommendations based on data review, stakeholder input, and evaluation of statewide practices during the reporting period.

Pursuant to section 409.1451(7), F.S., the Department is required to submit an annual report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives that includes the Council’s recommendations and the Department’s responses to those recommendations. To ensure transparency and provide a complete record for policymakers and stakeholders, the Department’s formal response to the Council’s recommendations is included as an appendix to this report.

In 2021, the Florida Legislature strengthened and expanded the Department’s reporting requirements to include the most recent data on the status and outcomes of young adults who turned 18 while in foster care, along with an analysis of those outcomes across the statutorily required domains. To support this requirement, the Council collects and reviews supplemental data, including information from Community-Based Care (CBC) Lead Agencies and, where applicable, subcontracted Case Management Organizations (CMOs). This data informs the Council’s evaluation of program effectiveness, service delivery, and alignment with statutory intent.

This report is intended to provide policymakers, the judiciary, the Department, and other stakeholders with a clear understanding of the current state of Independent Living services in Florida, including program successes, identified barriers, and opportunities for improvement. The report also serves as a foundation for future Council work, supporting continuous improvement, enhanced coordination, and data-informed decision-making to improve outcomes for young adults transitioning from foster care.

Executive Summary

The Independent Living Services Advisory Council (ILSAC) was established pursuant to sections 39.6251 and 409.1451, F.S., to review, assess, and make recommendations regarding the implementation and operation of Florida's Extended Foster Care (EFC) and Road-to-Independence (RTI) programs, including Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) and Aftercare Services. These statutes reflect the Legislature's intent to ensure that young adults exiting foster care receive the services, supports, and judicial oversight necessary to achieve permanency, self-sufficiency, and successful transitions to adulthood.

Consistent with its statutory responsibilities, during Fiscal Year 2024–25 the Council evaluated the effectiveness of Independent Living programs and services, monitored outcomes for young adults who turned 18 while in foster care across the domains required under section 409.1451, F.S., and advised the Department on actions to improve program implementation and performance. In alignment with section 39.6251, which establishes judicial oversight and requirements for Extended Foster Care participation and case plan completion, the Council identified variability in judicial practices related to permanency determinations and successful completion of EFC case plans across judicial circuits.

To address these inconsistencies and support the statutory intent of uniform application of EFC requirements, the Council prioritized review of the judicial Independent Living bench book and developed an Extended Foster Care flowchart. This tool is intended to provide the judiciary with a clear, high-level overview of the EFC process, including eligibility, qualifying activities, case plan requirements, and exit pathways, thereby promoting legally consistent decision-making statewide.

The Council also reviewed Community-Based Care Lead Agency data to assess compliance with statutory requirements and operational effectiveness of EFC and RTI programs. This review highlighted effective practices aligned with statutory goals, including the use of transition plans, life skills development, education and employment supports, and collaboration with community partners. At the same time, the Council identified ongoing challenges, including inconsistent referral and case transfer practices, legal complexities related to Title IV-E eligibility, and persistent housing barriers that undermine the statutory objective of self-sufficiency.

Notable progress during the reporting period included expanded Medicaid managed care supports for Independent Living youth, implementation of a standardized Needs Assessment tool to support equitable and appropriate use of EFC funds, and expansion of workforce development initiatives such as the Step into Success pilot program. These efforts directly support statutory requirements to improve outcomes in education, employment, health, housing, and overall well-being for young adults transitioning from foster care.

Housing instability continues to be the most significant barrier to achieving the outcomes envisioned under sections 39.6251 and 409.1451, F.S. For the second consecutive year, the Council monitored housing challenges, including Foster Youth to Independence voucher utilization and the implementation of new legislation such as Senate Bill 584 (Young Adult Housing Support). While the Department's three-year housing pilot represents a positive step, the Council emphasizes the need for broader, systemic solutions to fully meet statutory goals.

Looking ahead, the Council will conduct a comprehensive evaluation of Extended Foster Care in the upcoming year, with a primary focus on housing stability, performance management, and the gap between achieved permanency and actual self-sufficiency. This work will further support the Legislature's intent by informing data-driven recommendations to strengthen Independent Living services, enhance judicial consistency, and improve long-term outcomes for Florida's transitioning youth.

Fiscal Year 2024-25 Council Priorities and Activities

During Fiscal Year (FY) 2024–25, the ILSAC focused its work on strengthening statewide consistency, improving clarity in judicial decision-making, and laying the groundwork for deeper evaluation of Extended Foster Care (EFC) in future advisory cycles. Guided by its statutory responsibilities under sections 39.6251 and 409.1451, F.S., the Council prioritized activities that would enhance oversight, inform system partners, and improve outcomes for young adults transitioning from foster care.

A central focus of the Council's work this year was examining how EFC is understood and applied across judicial circuits. Through discussion, stakeholder input, and review of data and practices, the Council identified variation in judicial determinations related to permanency, case plan completion, and EFC participation. Recognizing the judiciary's critical role in the EFC process, the Council reviewed the existing Independent Living bench book and identified the need for updated and expanded guidance specific to Extended Foster Care.

To support greater consistency and alignment with statutory intent, the Council developed an Extended Foster Care flowchart designed to provide a clear, high-level overview of the EFC process. The flowchart illustrates eligibility requirements, qualifying activities, case planning considerations, and exit pathways, and is intended to serve as a practical tool for judicial officers and other system stakeholders. This effort reflects the Council's emphasis on system clarity and shared understanding as foundational elements of effective program implementation.

In addition to judicial guidance, the Council analyzed information collected through the Community-Based Care (CBC) Lead Agency Data Collection Forms to better understand how EFC is implemented statewide. This review highlighted common practices used by Lead Agencies to support young adults, including transition planning, life skills development, education and employment supports, and coordination with community partners. At the same time, the analysis revealed areas of inconsistency, such as referral and case transfer processes, legal considerations related to Title IV-E eligibility, and approaches to employment and housing supports.

Housing remained a significant area of concern and priority for the Council during FY 2024–25. For the second consecutive year, the Council monitored housing challenges faced by young adults, including utilization of Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers and the implementation of new housing-related legislation, such as Senate Bill 584 (Young Adult Housing Support). While the Council acknowledged promising initiatives, including the Department's three-year housing pilot, members emphasized that housing instability continues to undermine the goals of permanency and self-sufficiency envisioned in statute.

Overall, the Council's FY 2024–25 focus centered on strengthening the infrastructure that supports Independent Living services—judicial guidance, data collection, interagency coordination, and

foundational policy clarity—rather than conducting a full programmatic evaluation of Extended Foster Care. This deliberate approach positions the Council to undertake a more comprehensive EFC evaluation in the upcoming year, with a particular emphasis on housing stability, performance management, and the alignment between achieved permanency and long-term self-sufficiency for young adults.

Council Findings and System Review

Based on evaluative work conducted during Fiscal Year 2024–25, the Council identified opportunities to strengthen performance management and promote greater statewide consistency within the Independent Living system. In carrying out its statutory responsibilities, the Council observed variation across judicial circuits in permanency determinations and findings related to successful completion of Extended Foster Care (EFC) case plans. Recognizing the judiciary’s central role in the administration of EFC, the Council reviewed the existing Independent Living bench book and determined that additional, EFC-specific guidance would support more consistent and informed judicial decision-making statewide. To address this need, the Council developed an Extended Foster Care flowchart for consideration by the judiciary and potential inclusion in the bench book.

To further inform its analysis, the Council reviewed the 2025 Community-Based Care Lead Agency Data Collection Forms, which capture key information related to EFC implementation. This review highlighted the widespread use of transition plans as a foundational tool for planning, coordination, and life skills development. Lead Agencies reported a range of practices aligned with statutory goals, including financial literacy education, youth skills training supported by life coaches, distribution of informational materials outlining young adults’ rights and available programs, and use of toolkits designed to meet requirements outlined in Rule 65C-28, Florida Administrative Code.

The Council also examined reported legal and administrative considerations related to EFC participation. While several Lead Agencies indicated no legal barriers to achieving Title IV-E eligibility, others identified challenges related to court order language and aspects of the Voluntary Placement Agreement process. In addition, the Council noted variability in referral and case transfer practices, with some Lead Agencies lacking a formalized staffing or referral process for EFC transitions.

In reviewing employment-related supports, the Council found that most Lead Agencies rely on partnerships with CareerSource, Vocational Rehabilitation, Goodwill, and specialized Day Treatment programs to help young adults address employment barriers. Agencies also reported maintaining communication with service providers to monitor compliance when participation in a qualifying activity is intended to support employment readiness.

The Council further reviewed information related to judicial review hearings. The most commonly discussed topics included qualifying activities, living arrangements, financial stability, and case plan compliance. Other areas addressed included permanent connections, program compliance, medical and mental health needs, life skills development, service referrals, and applications for services through the Agency for Persons with Disabilities and Supplemental Security Income.

Lead Agencies consistently emphasized the importance of strong partnerships with community organizations, businesses, educational institutions, and government entities to support young adults transitioning from foster care. These partnerships were also identified as critical in supporting young

adults during court hearings, case staffings, and personal appointments. Accountability and youth engagement were highlighted as key factors contributing to successful outcomes.

Finally, when discussing practices that support successful transitions from Extended Foster Care, Lead Agencies reported varying areas of emphasis. Some focused on Postsecondary Education Services and Supports, Aftercare services, and Foster Youth to Independence vouchers, while others prioritized housing stability, employment coaching, and data tracking. As reflected throughout this report, the development of an Extended Foster Care flowchart represents an important initial step in strengthening system clarity and supporting consistent, informed decision-making across the Independent Living system.

Independent Living Program Highlights

During Fiscal Year 2024–25, the Council observed meaningful progress in the implementation and enhancement of Independent Living services that align with statutory goals and support improved outcomes for young adults transitioning from foster care. These successes reflect effective collaboration between the Department, system partners, and service providers, and demonstrate the value of targeted investments, data-informed decision-making, and cross-system coordination. Collectively, these advancements provide a foundation for continued system improvement and offer scalable models that can inform future policy, practice, and program development to further strengthen the Independent Living landscape statewide.

Expanded Health Plan Supports for Independent Living Youth

The ILSAC and Independent Living Program identified the introduction of new services through Sunshine Health a significant success. Under the statewide Medicaid Managed Care contract awarded by the Agency for Healthcare Administration and effective February 1, 2025, Sunshine Health now assigns an Independent Living case manager to every member age 17–21-years-old enrolled in the Pathway to Shine specialty plan (formerly the Child Welfare Specialty Plan). This enhancement provides additional individualized support and improves access to expanded health plan benefits specifically designed for Independent Living members. New expanded benefits include YMCA gym memberships, educational vouchers to offset application fees, tutoring and testing related expenses, Peer Certification funding to support career pathways for individuals with lived experience, and tattoo removal services for former gang members and survivors of human trafficking.

Implementation of a Standardized Needs Assessment Tool

ILSAC also recognizes the Department's efforts to prioritize the Council's recommendation to develop a standardized Needs Assessment for use by EFC Independent Living Specialists. The Needs Assessment provides a clearer understanding of youth needs while helping young adults distinguish between incidental needs and discretionary expenses. The Department convened a workgroup with field partners to develop the tool, which was successfully implemented on July 1, 2025. The assessment captures key categories, including education, housing, hygiene essentials, transportation, childcare, basic needs, and discretionary expenses.

Step Into Success Pilot Program

Finally, ILSAC acknowledges the success of the Department's Step into Success pilot program. This three-year pilot provides eligible current and former foster youth with opportunities to develop essential workforce and professional skills, support their transition to independent living, and prepare for long-

term success. The first cohort launched in Tallahassee in May 2024 with 15 participants and the program expanded in 2025 to include additional cohorts in Orlando and Tallahassee, demonstrating early momentum and scalability.

Independent Living Program Challenges

Despite progress made during FY 2024–25, the Council identified several persistent barriers that continue to limit the ability of Independent Living programs to fully achieve the outcomes envisioned under sections 39.6251 and 409.1451, F.S. These barriers are complex, interrelated, and, in many cases, systemic in nature.

Housing instability remains the most significant and enduring challenge facing young adults transitioning from foster care. For the second consecutive year, the Council observed limited housing availability, affordability constraints, and inconsistent access to housing supports, including Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers. While recent legislative actions and the Department's housing pilot represent positive steps, housing barriers continue to undermine permanency, educational continuity, employment stability, and long-term self-sufficiency.

The Council also identified variability in judicial practices related to EFC participation, permanency determinations, and findings of successful case plan completion. Inconsistent interpretation and application of statutory requirements across judicial circuits can create confusion for young adults and service providers, potentially impacting eligibility, continuity of services, and outcomes. These inconsistencies highlight the need for updated judicial guidance and tools to support uniform understanding and implementation of EFC.

Operational and administrative challenges further contribute to uneven service delivery. Lead Agency data revealed differences in referral and case transfer practices, with some agencies lacking formal processes to support timely and coordinated transitions into EFC. Additionally, some agencies reported legal and procedural challenges related to court order language and the Voluntary Placement Agreement process, which may affect Title IV-E eligibility and access to federal funding.

While employment and education supports are widely available, young adults continue to face barriers related to workforce readiness, transportation, and balancing employment with qualifying activities required under EFC. These challenges are often compounded by housing instability and limited access to consistent adult supports.

Finally, the Council noted a broader gap between achieved permanency and actual self-sufficiency. While statutory permanency milestones may be met, many young adults continue to require sustained supports to successfully transition to independence. Addressing this gap will require continued focus on performance management, cross-system coordination, and the use of data to assess whether services are effectively supporting long-term stability and independence.

Looking ahead, the Council intends to maintain focused attention on these barriers in future advisory cycles. This will include continued examination of housing stability, judicial consistency, performance management, and the alignment between permanency outcomes and true self-sufficiency. Through ongoing data analysis, stakeholder engagement, and incorporation of youth voice, the Council will

develop targeted, data-informed recommendations aimed at reducing barriers and strengthening pathways to independence for young adults transitioning from foster care.

Ongoing Collaboration and Process Enhancements

To support effective collaboration and strengthen the Council's ability to carry out its statutory advisory role, the Council has identified several process enhancements that would further align Department and Council timelines and support continuous improvement.

Annual Report Timeframe

The Council submits its Annual Report each September, and the Department's response plays a critical role in informing the Council's subsequent research, analysis, and planning activities. While section 409.1451(7), F.S., requires the Department's response to be submitted by December 31 to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, receiving the Department's response earlier in the advisory cycle would enhance coordination and effectiveness. Earlier receipt of the Department's response would allow the Council to better assess alignment with shared objectives, inform its Annual Roadmap planning, and support a more robust and data-informed analysis during the upcoming advisory cycle.

Timely Appointment of Council Members

The Council also notes the importance of timely confirmation of appointed members to ensure continuity, quorum, and effective leadership. At the time of the drafting of this report, several identified appointees were awaiting confirmation, and the Council was operating with a limited number of voting members and without a designated Chair or Co-Chair. These conditions constrain the Council's ability to fully engage in planning, decision-making, and execution of its Annual Roadmap. Timely confirmation of appointments supports effective onboarding, leadership continuity, and meaningful participation in Council activities.

The Council views these items as opportunities for continued collaboration with the Department to strengthen governance, enhance communication, and ensure that the Council is positioned to provide timely, well-informed guidance in support of Independent Living programs and services.

Recommendations

Based on the Council's FY 2024-25 activities, two recommendations have been identified for consideration:

1. Extended Foster Care Judicial Guidance

The Council identified the need for updated and clearer judicial guidance related to Extended Foster Care (EFC). The current Independent Living bench book does not fully reflect the structure, requirements, and processes of the EFC program, which has contributed to inconsistent application of statutory requirements across judicial circuits.

To address this gap, the Council developed an Extended Foster Care flowchart that provides a high-level, step-by-step overview of EFC eligibility, qualifying activities, case planning considerations, judicial review points, and exit pathways. This tool is intended to support judges in making informed, consistent decisions aligned with statutory intent.

Actionable Next Steps:

- Coordinate with the Office of State Courts Administrator and other relevant partners, such as the Guardian ad Litem Office, to review and update the Independent Living sections of the judicial bench book.
- Incorporate the Extended Foster Care flowchart into the bench book and bench cards as a reference tool.
- Follow established judicial protocols for content review, approval, and publication to ensure accuracy and consistency.
- Disseminate the updated bench book materials statewide to judicial circuits and key Independent Living stakeholders, including Children's Legal Services.

These actions will help promote consistent judicial understanding of EFC, reduce variability in decision-making, and support more predictable and equitable outcomes for young adults participating in Independent Living services.

See Appendix C – Extended Foster Care Flow Chart

2. Definition of Achieving Permanency in Extended Foster Care

The Council recommends strengthening statewide consistency and accountability within Extended Foster Care by emphasizing measurable case plan progress toward self-sufficiency and defining what it means to achieve the permanency goal of “transition to independence”. This includes promoting uniform judicial expectations across circuits, reinforcing the role of case planning as a tool for skill development rather than placement maintenance, and encouraging regular review of young adults’ progress in education, employment, housing readiness, and life skills. The Council further recommends collaboration among the judiciary, Community-Based Care agencies, and the Department to ensure Extended Foster Care remains a purposeful, time-limited support that actively prepares young adults for successful independence.

Actionable Next Steps:

- Coordinate with Independent Living stakeholders, including youth with lived experience, to define successful completion of the EFC permanency goal ‘transition to independence.’
- Incorporate successful completion of program goals into the EFC discharge process.
- Continue to research and develop a standard tool to measure self-sufficiency skills for young adults on an individual and statewide level.

The above action steps will ensure consistency in measuring self-sufficiency throughout the state as well as provide a basis to successfully discharge a young adult from EFC based on achievement of the permanency goal.

Future Focus and Strategic Direction

Building on the work completed during Fiscal Year 2024–25, the Council will continue to strengthen its advisory role by using data, collaboration, and continuous improvement strategies to inform its future work. The Council will maintain use of the Continuous Improvement (CI) Action Deck to track issues, monitor progress, and prioritize activities as part of its annual planning and work calendar development.

Ongoing analysis will continue to draw from key data sources, including the Community-Based Care Lead Agency Data Collection Form, the Specialized Quality Assessment report, the Young Adults Receiving Services (YARS) report, and other available datasets to support informed decision-making.

Housing stability will remain the Council's primary focus in the coming year, reflecting its persistent role as the most significant barrier to self-sufficiency for young adults transitioning from foster care. To advance this work, the Council will examine existing data, identify meaningful performance measures and milestones, and review in-state and national best practices. The Council will also prioritize incorporation of youth voice, including input from Youth Councils, to ensure that recommendations reflect lived experience and practical solutions.

The Council looks forward to continued engagement with the Department regarding the implementation and outcomes of the housing pilot, as well as learning about additional housing strategies being employed by Lead Agencies across the state. These discussions will help inform opportunities for program refinement, expansion, and replication of effective approaches.

In addition, the Council intends to develop a Self-Sufficiency Assessment tool, which will measure indicators such as educational progress, financial literacy, and employment readiness. Analysis of these findings will support identification of service gaps and areas where targeted intervention may strengthen long-term outcomes.

As the Council moves into the next advisory cycle, it will apply a structured and deliberate approach to reviewing identified challenges, conducting research, and developing data-informed recommendations. Through continued collaboration with the Department, system partners, and stakeholders, the Council remains committed to strengthening Independent Living services and advancing pathways to stability, self-sufficiency, and successful adulthood for young adults transitioning from foster care.

The Independent Living Services Advisory Council extends its appreciation to the Department, the Secretary, and the Florida Legislature for their continued support and attention.

Appendix A: Council Membership

| Role | Agency/Organization | Name | Initial or Reappointment Date |
|-----------------|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Chair | VACANT | VACANT | N/A |
| Co-Chair | VACANT | VACANT | N/A |
| Council Member* | Young Adult(s) | Ashley Cabrera | September 2025 |
| Council Member* | Department of Children and Families (Headquarters Office) | Terrence Watts | September 2025 |
| Council Member* | Department of Children and Families (Regional Office) | Heather DeFrancisco | September 2025 |
| Council Member* | Community-Based Care Lead Agency | Margie Dotson <i>Communities Connected for Kids</i> | January 2024 |
| Council Member* | Department of Juvenile Justice | Alison Fulford | September 2025 |
| Council Member* | Department of Commerce | Karmyn Hill | Pending appointment |
| Council Member* | Department of Education | Chelsea Strickland | January 2024 |
| Council Member* | Agency for Health Care Administration | Melissa Vergeson | Pending appointment |
| Council Member* | State Youth Advisory Board | Maria Batista <i>Florida Youth SHINE</i> | September 2025 |
| Council Member* | CareerSource Florida | Elizabeth Glenn | September 2025 |
| Council Member* | Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office | Melissa Jagger | September 2025 |
| Council Member* | Foster Parent(s) | VACANT | N/A |
| Council Member* | Agency for Persons with Disability | Liesel Ramos | September 2025 |
| Council Member | Sunshine Health Plan | Sara Pham | September 2025 |
| Council Member | Community-Based Care Lead Agency | Janay Davis <i>Northwest FL Health Network</i> | Pending appointment |
| Council Member | Community-Based Care Lead Agency | Eric Marshall <i>Citrus Family Care Network</i> | Pending appointment |
| Council Member | Community-Based Care Lead Agency | Sarah O'Neal <i>Family Support Services of North FL</i> | Pending appointment |

*Denotes statutorily required membership, pursuant to section 409.1451, F.S.

Appendix B: Council Meetings

Throughout FY 2024–25, the Independent Living Services Advisory Council convened regularly to advance its statutory advisory role through structured discussion, data review, and engagement with subject-matter experts from across the child welfare, judicial, housing, health, and workforce systems. Council meetings included in-person and virtual sessions focused on Extended Foster Care implementation, judicial oversight, case planning, housing stability, self-sufficiency measures, and system performance. By intentionally bringing together practitioners, policy experts, and system partners, the Council strengthened its ability to identify challenges, evaluate best practices, and develop informed, practical recommendations to support improved outcomes for young adults transitioning from foster care. A short summary of the Council meetings is outlined below:

| Meeting Date | Presenters | Meeting Discussion |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| January 17, 2025 | Council leadership, Department staff, Ginger Rockey-Johnson (<i>subject-matter expert input on judicial perspective</i>) | The Council reviewed its statutory purpose and roles and began onboarding and officer discussions. Members reviewed the Community-Based Care (CBC) Data Collection Form to better understand how Extended Foster Care (EFC) cases progress through the court system and how judicial decisions impact permanency and self-sufficiency. Significant discussion focused on case plan compliance, measurement of self-sufficiency, and whether existing tools adequately reflect young adult progress. The Council explored the need for clearer judicial guidance, including the potential development of a bench book or job aid, and reviewed an Independent Living curriculum module related to EFC. |
| February 24, 2025 | Council members, Department staff | The Council reviewed a CBC Data Collection Summary presentation prepared by a subcommittee and discussed statewide trends related to EFC eligibility, referral practices, employment supports, housing barriers, and judicial review topics. Members identified inconsistencies in referral and case transfer processes and discussed how success is measured across regions. The Council established its 2025 calendar of activities and confirmed its primary focus question for the year: how permanency is achieved through successful completion of an EFC case plan, including the development of judicial guidance to support this goal. |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| March 10, 2025 | Ginger Rockey-Johnson (<i>subject-matter expert input on judicial perspective</i>) | The Council received a detailed presentation on the purpose and function of judicial bench books and bench cards, with a focus on how they guide judicial authority and decision-making. Members reviewed EFC statutory requirements and discussed defining benchmarks for qualifying activities and case plan compliance. The Council also examined assessment tools used by other systems, such as the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, to explore how level of need and progress might be measured. This meeting marked a key step toward outlining the structure and content of an EFC flowchart and related judicial guidance. |
| April 14, 2025 | Council members, Department staff, Ginger Rockey-Johnson (<i>subject-matter expert input on judicial perspective</i>) | The Council reviewed CBC data related to judicial oversight and discussed how “successful completion” of EFC is defined and documented. Members explored terminology, case plan compliance, and transitions between EFC and other Independent Living programs. The Council began outlining the EFC flowchart for inclusion in the judicial bench book, reviewing relevant statutes and administrative rules to ensure accuracy and clarity. Discussion emphasized balancing collaboration with clearly defined roles and statutory boundaries. |
| May 5, 2025 | Kyle Johnson and Maria Batista (<i>lived experience experts</i>) | The Council reviewed a draft Extended Foster Care process flowchart and recommended refinements to clarify eligibility, participation, and termination pathways. Members discussed whether to develop an additional termination or discharge flowchart and how much detail would be appropriate for judicial use. The Council also finalized plans for report-writing sessions and confirmed roles for drafting and editing the annual report. This meeting represented the culmination of the Council’s work on developing practical tools to support consistent judicial understanding of EFC. |
| June 17, 2025 | Council members | The Council met and discussed the contents of the Annual Report, began drafting, and discussed priorities for the coming advisory year. |
| July 14, 2025 | Council members | The Council met and discussed the contents of the Annual Report, finalized drafting of the report, and discussed priorities for the coming advisory year. |
| August 11, 2025 | Council members | The Council met and finalized the annual report. |
| September 8, 2025 | JR Mentor (Selfless Love) and Department | The Council received a presentation on Self-Sufficiency Matrix and Overview for Housing for post 18 programs. |
| October 1, 2025 | Council members | The Council met and discussed priorities for the coming advisory year as well as the CBC Data Collection Form |

Appendix C: Extended Foster Care Flowchart

Extended Foster Care (EFC)

Section 39.6251, F.S. | 65C-41, F.A.C.

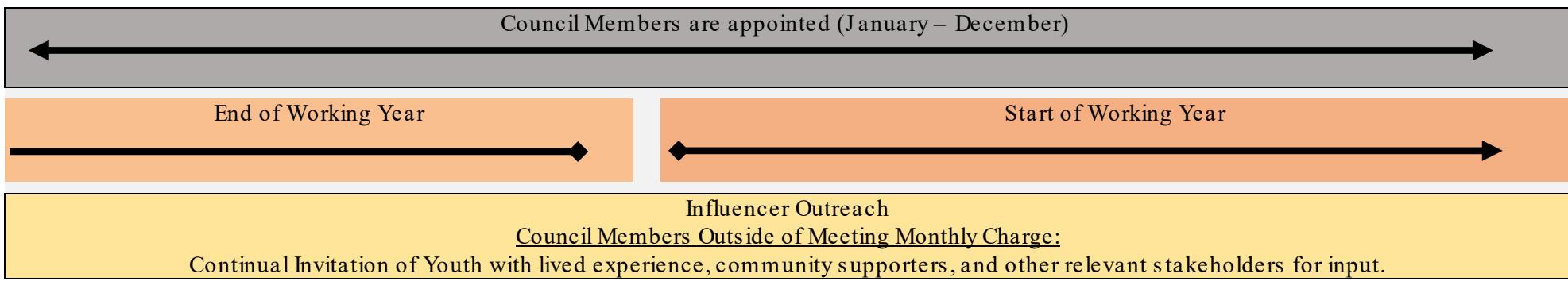


Extended Foster Care

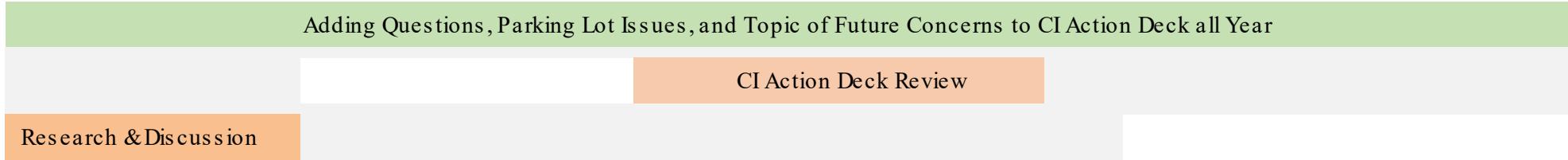
Appendix D: Independent Living Council Annual Roadmap

| Research, Analysis & Discussion | Report Writing Sessions | Planning, Review & Measurement Results | Data Request to the Department DCF (Preparation) | Out of Session |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--|--|---------------------|
| January – May | June – July | August – September | October | November – December |

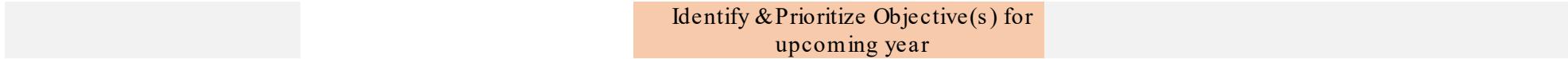
Stakeholders (Council Members Appointments)



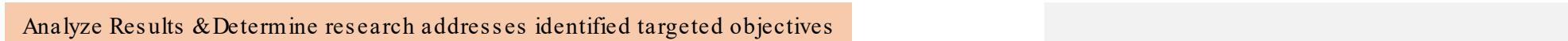
Subjects (Community, Youth/Young Adults with Lived Experience, Other Stakeholders)



Objective, Function & Focus



Analyze Results



| Research, Analysis & Discussion | Report Writing Sessions | Planning, Review & Measurement Results | Data Request to the Department DCF (Preparation) | Out of Session |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--|--|---------------------|
| January – May | June – July | August – September | October | November – December |

Innovate & Improve

Reporting format to
 1. Problem Statement
 2. Research and Analysis
 3. Recommendation Statement

How do we improve this process?

Does this recommendation solve the problem statement?

Report & Repeat

In Person Sessions for Report Writing

CBC Data Collection Form to DCF for January return



**Department Response to the Independent Living Services
Advisory Council
2025 Annual Report**

Taylor Hatch
Secretary

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Introduction

Since its establishment in 2002, the Independent Living Services Advisory Council (Council) has provided recommendations on the implementation and operation of Independent Living services through a comprehensive annual report to the Legislature. As required by section 409.1451(7), Florida Statutes (F.S.), the Florida Department of Children and Families (Department) submits this response to the Council's recommendations as part of the 2025 Annual Report. This response reflects the Department's commitment to collaboration, transparency, and continuous improvement in support of young adults transitioning from care.

Department Response

The Department extends its sincere appreciation to the Independent Living Services Advisory Council and its members for their dedication, expertise and ongoing partnership. The Council's work continues to inform program development, operational improvements, and strategic planning across Independent Living services. Through continued collaboration, the Department and the Council share a commitment to strengthening outcomes for youth and young adults in care.

The items identified by the Council in their Annual Report include both opportunities for enhanced collaboration and process alignment and formal recommendations for system improvement. The Department's responses are provided accordingly.

Process Enhancements to Support Collaboration

1. Annual Report Timeframe

The Council identified the timing of the Department's annual response as an opportunity to enhance collaboration and support the Council's planning and research activities. While section 409.1451(7), F.S., requires the Department's response to be submitted by December 31 of each year, the Department recognizes the value of timely information-sharing to support the Council's ongoing advisory work.

Although an earlier submission deadline may not always be feasible, the Department will continue to make every effort to ensure its response is completed by the statutory deadline and provided to the Council in advance of its January meeting, when practicable. This approach supports continuity between advisory cycles and promotes productive collaboration.

2. Timely Appointment of Council Members

The Council also noted the importance of recruitment and timely appointment to ensure dynamic and robust representation of Council members to bolster quorum, leadership continuity, and full participation in Council activities. Since submission of the Council's report, nine appointees have been confirmed to serve through January 2027, either through initial or reappointment. Additional recommendations for statutorily required positions have been submitted and the Department continues to work collaboratively with partner agencies to identify and appoint qualified candidates.

To further promote engagement and awareness, the Department will continue to include the Council as a standing agenda item on Independent Living statewide calls, allowing broader participation and information-sharing even among stakeholders who are not appointed voting members. The Department also continues to explore new avenues to develop partnerships, awareness, and deepen recruitment efforts.

Formal Recommendations

1. Extended Foster Care Judicial Guidance

The Department commends the Council for its work in developing the Extended Foster Care (EFC) flowchart and recognizes its value as a practical tool to support consistent understanding of EFC requirements among system partners. The Department will incorporate the flowchart into the Independent Living specialty training curricula, subject to review by General Counsel and Children's Legal Services.

The Department supports the Council's recommendation to advance development of judicial guidance specific to EFC. The Department will collaborate with the Council to engage with the Office of State Courts Administrator Dependency Court Improvement System Panel and other appropriate partners to provide subject-matter expertise and support efforts to update judicial reference materials related to Independent Living services.

These collaborative efforts will help promote consistent application of statutory requirements, strengthen judicial understanding of EFC, and support improved outcomes for young adults transitioning to independence.

2. Defining Permanency in Extended Foster Care

The Department supports the recommendation to create a standard definition of case plan goal completion in EFC; therefore, achieving the permanency goal of transition to independence. At present, achieving permanency is a statutorily established reason for discharge from EFC, which often occurs when a young adult reaches the age of discharge at age 21, or 22 with a qualifying disability. Due to the broad nature of the statement of achieving permanency while in EFC, the lack of consistent case plan progress outcome measures, and the limited assessment tools currently in existence, judiciary oversight of a young adult's accountability of EFC case plan compliance does not appear to be supported with existing practices or tools.

For the upcoming Council year, the Department looks forward to collaborating around research and development of a self-sufficiency assessment tool and ultimately defining what achieving permanency looks like for EFC participants. These supports will ensure that EFC stakeholders can shift the narrative from 'termination from EFC' to 'successful completion of program goals.'

Independent Living Program Overview

Consistent with the Department's commitment to continuous improvement through data-informed analysis, the voice of lived experiences, and intentional action, this section provides an overview of Independent Living programs and service utilization for state fiscal year (FY) 2024-25.

Extended Foster Care (EFC)

Extended Foster Care, pursuant to section 39.621, F.S., is available to young adults who turn 18 while in the Department's legal custody or in licensed foster care. The program allows eligible young adults to remain in or return to a supervised living arrangement. Approved living arrangements may include licensed foster homes or group homes, host homes, transitional living programs, shared housing, or individual housing.

EFC provides continued case management services, court oversight, room and board, and other supportive services designed to promote stability, skill development, and successful transition into adulthood.

To maintain eligibility for EFC, young adults must participate in at least one qualifying activity, which may include:

- Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential;
- Enrollment in post-secondary or vocational education;
- Employment for at least 80 hours per month;
- Participation in a program or activity designed to promote or eliminate barriers to employment; or
- Inability to participate in one of the above activities on a full-time basis due to a documented disability.

Young adults may remain in EFC until their 21st birthday, or until age 22 if they are actively participating in EFC and have a documented disability that impacts their ability to transition to independence and necessitates additional time in care. Participation in EFC is voluntary, and young adults may opt out at any time or reapply to return to care prior to their 21st birthday.

Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS)

Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS), as outlined in section 409.1451(2), F.S., is available to former foster youth who turned 18 while in Department custody, were adopted from foster care after age 14, or were placed with a court-approved dependency guardian after spending at least six months in licensed care within the 12 months preceding placement or adoption.

To qualify for PESS, young adults must have spent at least six months in licensed care during their lifetime, earned a standard high school diploma or equivalent, been admitted to at least nine credit hours at an eligible Bright Futures postsecondary educational institution (or equivalent at a technical school), and submitted an error-free Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

PESS provides a legislatively established stipend of \$1720 per month to assist with housing, utilities, and other living expenses while the young adult is pursuing postsecondary education. Prior to receiving the stipend, the Department assesses each young adult's financial literacy, executive functioning, and self-regulation to determine the most appropriate method of payment. Based on this assessment, the Department may pay housing expenses directly on the young adult's behalf to promote housing stability. PESS also includes ongoing transitional and financial planning to support current needs and long-term goals.

Young adults must meet annual renewal requirements and demonstrate academic progress to continue receiving the stipend. PESS support is available to eligible young adults through age 23 years old.

Aftercare Services

As outlined in section 409.1451(3), F.S., Aftercare Services is a temporary program designed to assist young adults in transitioning to self-sufficiency or establishing eligibility for EFC, PESS, the Extended Guardianship Assistance Program, or the Extended Maintenance Adoption Subsidy. Young adults are eligible for Aftercare services if they turned 18 while in Department custody or licensed foster care, or if they spent at least six months in out-of-home care after the age of 14 and were not reunified. Services are available to young adults between the ages of 18 and 23 who submit an Aftercare application.

An individualized Aftercare Services Plan is developed in collaboration with the young adult to identify goals and outline services and tasks necessary to achieve these goals. This plan is reviewed and updated at least every 90 days.

Aftercare Services may include, but are not limited to:

- Mentoring or tutoring
- Mental health or substance use services
- Life skills or parenting classes
- Job readiness and career skills training
- Temporary financial assistance and
- Financial literacy education

Independent Living Program Participation

Table 1 presents the number of young adults served in each Independent Living program by Community-Based Care Lead Agency over the past three State Fiscal Years (SFYs).

Table 1: Number of young adults served in each Independent Living Program by lead agency

| Lead Agency | 2022-2023 | | | 2023-2024 | | | 2024-2025 | | |
|---|-----------|-----|------|-----------|-----|------|-----------|-----|------|
| | Aftercare | EFC | PESS | Aftercare | EFC | PESS | Aftercare | EFC | PESS |
| CBC of Brevard (now known as Family Partnership of Central Florida as of May 2024) | 26 | 44 | 9 | 15 | 42 | 17 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| ChildNet Inc | 23 | 140 | 108 | 39 | 122 | 111 | 49 | 126 | 109 |
| ChildNet Palm Beach | 12 | 105 | 59 | 27 | 104 | 59 | 30 | 116 | 55 |
| Children's Network Hillsborough | 54 | 82 | 50 | 74 | 81 | 48 | 55 | 90 | 59 |
| Children's Network of SW Florida | 8 | 41 | 52 | 14 | 39 | 60 | 18 | 55 | 60 |
| Citrus Health Network | 157 | 240 | 175 | 114 | 232 | 146 | 81 | 204 | 157 |
| Community Partnership for Children | 18 | 49 | 40 | 16 | 43 | 55 | 13 | 56 | 63 |
| Communities Connected for Kids | 11 | 24 | 26 | 13 | 24 | 23 | 6 | 25 | 24 |
| Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnership of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024) | 43 | 136 | 56 | 41 | 128 | 72 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Family Partnerships Central Florida | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 51 | 169 | 96 |
| Family Support Services | 20 | 80 | 29 | 14 | 82 | 30 | 29 | 88 | 37 |
| FSS Suncoast | 44 | 83 | 43 | 49 | 80 | 52 | 33 | 91 | 46 |
| Heartland for Children | 41 | 71 | 29 | 35 | 74 | 41 | 40 | 78 | 56 |
| Kids Central Inc | 62 | 48 | 38 | 49 | 55 | 39 | 17 | 50 | 50 |
| Kids First of Florida Inc | 0 | 20 | 12 | 2 | 16 | 13 | 4 | 15 | 13 |
| NWF Health Network-East | 20 | 56 | 27 | 12 | 63 | 29 | 20 | 51 | 27 |
| NWF Health Network-West (formerly FFN) | 12 | 75 | 19 | 21 | 85 | 22 | 25 | 77 | 20 |
| Partnership for Strong Families | 6 | 10 | 5 | 7 | 17 | 7 | 8 | 33 | 6 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Safe Children Coalition | 30 | 30 | 15 | 13 | 38 | 19 | 13 | 47 | 22 |
| St Johns County Commission | 1 | 12 | 8 | 0 | 10 | 8 | 1 | 11 | 9 |
| Statewide | 588 | 1346 | 800 | 555 | 1335 | 851 | 493 | 1382 | 909 |
| Previously Reported | 467 | 1733 | 857 | 609 | 1540 | 879 | N/A | N/A | N/A |

**Source: OCWDRU #1089, FFSN Data Repository

The data illustrates a 12.5 percent increase in the number of young adults utilizing at least one Independent Living program from SFY 2023-24 to SFY 2024-25. Because young adults may receive services from more than one program in a given year, the totals include some duplication.

Participation in EFC and PESS continues to trend upward statewide, while participation in Aftercare services has decreased. This decrease may reflect increased utilization of EFC and PESS as young adults pursue longer-term stability and educational opportunities.

Counts presented in this report reflect only young adults who received services during the applicable fiscal year. Previously reported figures included payments reconciled during the fiscal year, which overstated participation. Corrected counts are presented above, with prior totals noted for reference.

Additionally, the count for EFC participants has increased by an additional 12 young adults compared to the Department's previously submitted Proviso report for FY 2024-25. This is a result of a population of young adults who reside at a specific group home that were inadvertently excluded from the previous counts.

Data and Outcomes

Secondary Education

Table 2 below presents the number of young adults served by each Community-Based Care Lead Agency who achieved a high school diploma, General Educational Development (GED) certificate, or certificate of completion during the past three SFYs. These outcomes reflect educational attainment among young adults participating in Independent Living programs.

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

| LEAD AGENCY | 2022-23 | 2023-24 | 2024-25 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|
| Brevard Family Partnership (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024) | 30 | N/A | N/A |
| ChildNet-Broward | 110 | 125 | 103 |
| ChildNet-Palm Beach | 54 | 84 | 67 |
| Children's Network of SW Florida | 21 | 71 | 66 |
| Citrus Health Network | 207 | 206 | 196 |
| Communities Connected for Kids | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Community Partnership for Children | 18 | 15 | 44 |
| Family Support Services- Suncoast | 71 | 75 | 60 |
| Children's Network Hillsborough | 83 | 81 | 59 |
| Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024) | 99 | N/A | N/A |
| Family Partnerships Central Florida (combined for Embrace and CBC of Brevard) | N/A | 141 | 133 |
| NWF Health Network – West (Previously known as Families First Network) | 53 | 56 | 45 |

| | | | |
|--|------------|--------------|--------------|
| Family Integrity Program | 8 | 8 | 8 |
| Family Support Services of North Florida | 31 | 26 | 33 |
| Heartland for Children | 20 | 38 | 40 |
| Kids Central, Inc. | 33 | 38 | 44 |
| Kids First of Florida, Inc. | 9 | 5 | 17 |
| Northwest Florida Health Network-East | 58 | 54 | 45 |
| Partnership for Strong Families | 8 | 9 | 11 |
| Safe Children Coalition | 25 | 35 | 35 |
| Statewide | 942 | 1,070 | 1,010 |

Statewide data indicate a slight decline in secondary educational attainment in FY 2024-25 compared to the prior fiscal year, following an increase observed in FY 2023-24. While several Lead Agencies maintained or increased the number of young adults achieving secondary credentials, others experienced modest decreases, contributing to the overall statewide trend.

Additionally, the variation across Lead Agencies reflects differences in program size, population needs, and local educational partnerships. Continued monitoring of these trends will help inform strategies to support educational attainment and align services with statutory goals related to self-sufficiency and long-term success.

Post-secondary Education

During review of the Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) education record reports, the Department identified data integrity issues resulting from a change in the Florida Safe Families Network (FSFN) grade-level coding implemented mid-FY 2023-24. Specifically, students who were enrolled in postsecondary programs but had not yet completed a degree were incorrectly recorded as having attained a college degree. To address this issue, the grade-level distinction was updated to accurately reflect enrollment status using the categories “some college” or “vocational/technical,” which indicate that the young adult is actively working toward a degree or certification.

The review also revealed a need for additional guidance on completing education records to ensure consistent and accurate reporting of postsecondary outcomes. In response, the Department provided targeted guidance to Lead Agencies and field staff, including the distribution of a guidance summary, individualized correction requests, and a series of virtual meetings conducted throughout FY 2024-25 to support accurate data entry and correction.

Chart 1 below reflects the number of young adults participating in the PESS program who successfully obtained an associate degree, bachelor’s degree, post-graduate degree, or vocational certificate of completion. The data presented have been corrected to align with the updated reporting definitions and accurately represent degree attainment for the past two fiscal years.

Chart 1: Number of Young Adults in PESS with a Postsecondary Degree

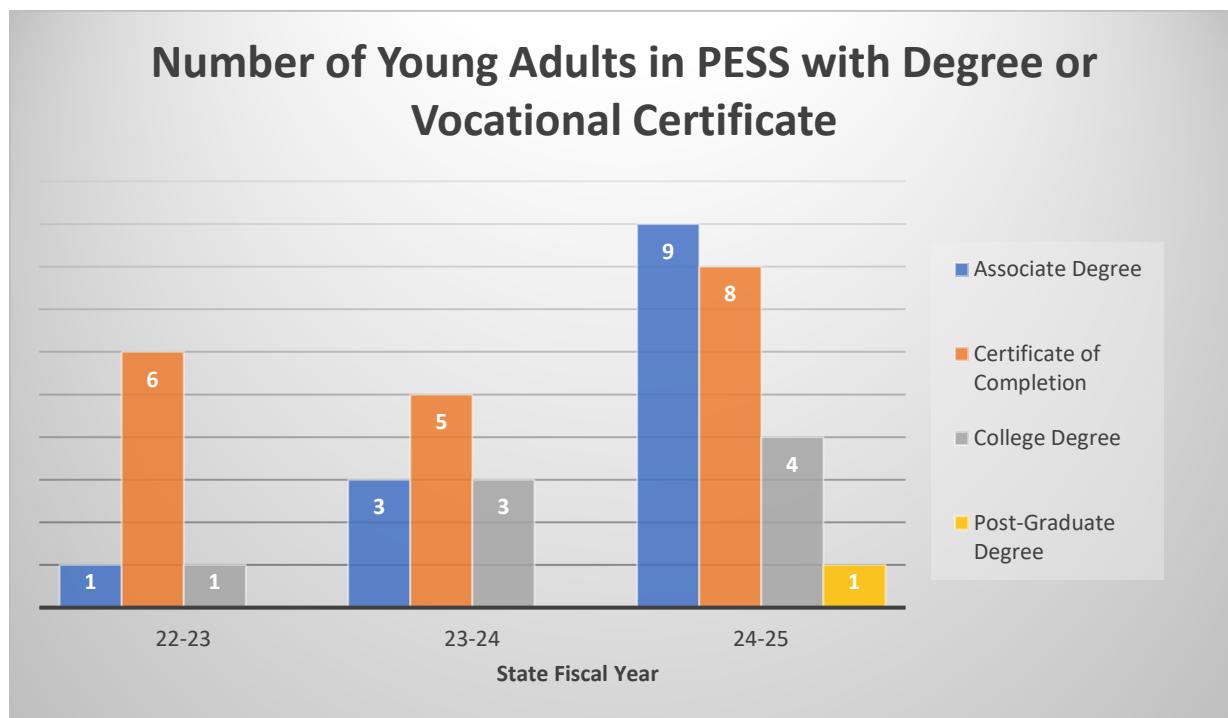
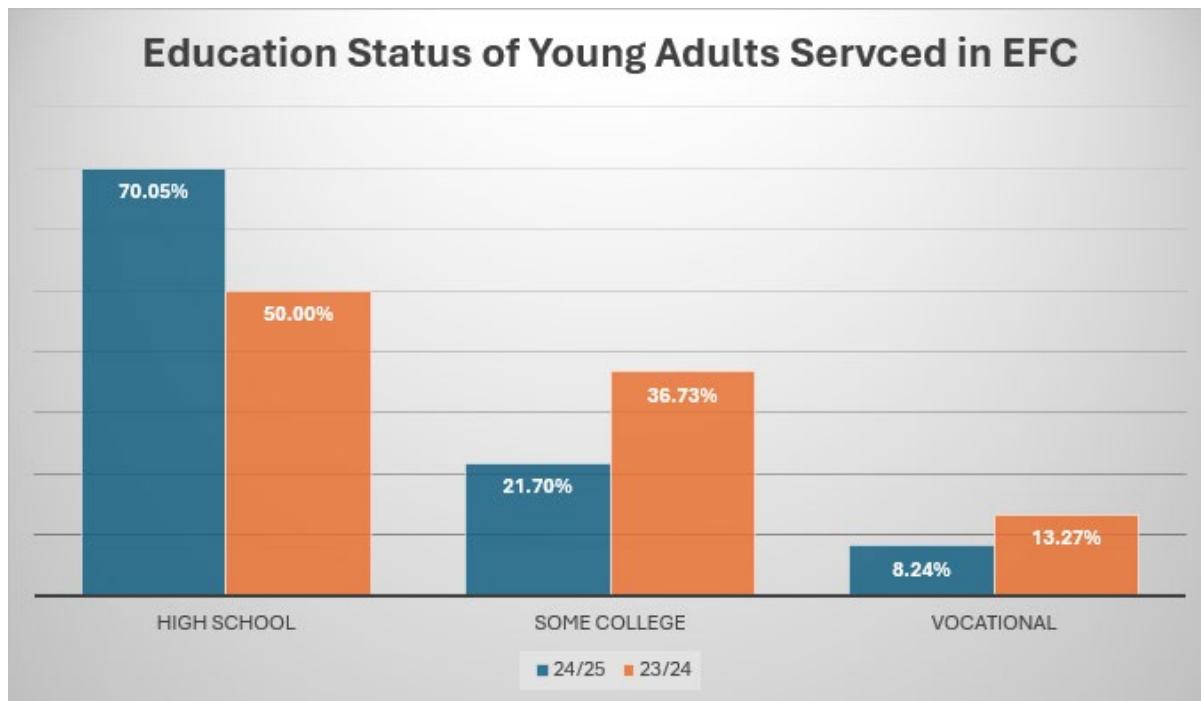


Chart 2 illustrates the educational enrollment status of young adults participating in EFC whose qualifying activity is education and who have an active education record. The data includes young adults enrolled in high school, postsecondary education, or vocational training and does not reflect participants whose qualifying activities fall outside of the educational category.

The data indicates an increase in high school enrollment among young adults in EFC compared to the prior fiscal year, while enrollment in postsecondary and vocational education declined. This shift suggests that a greater proportion of young adults in EFC are focused on completing secondary education prior to transitioning to postsecondary pathways.

Additionally, the number of young adults receiving PESS has steadily increased over the last three fiscal years. This trend suggests that many young adults transition from EFC to PESS after earning a high school diploma or GED, rather than remaining in EFC while enrolled in postsecondary education.

Chart 2: Education Status of Young Adults Served in EFC SFY 2024-2025



Employment (EFC)

Table 3 presents data reported by Lead Agencies on the number of young adults participating in EFC who recorded a period of employment during the past three SFYs. It is important to note that employment is one of several qualifying activities for EFC participation and is not a required condition for all young adults in the program.

Table 3. Number of Young Adults in EFC with a Recorded Period of Employment

| CBC Lead Agency | 2022-2023 | 2023-2024 | 2024-2025 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Brevard Family Partnership (now known as Family Partnership of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024) | 18 | N/A | N/A |
| ChildNet-Broward | 26 | 29 | 21 |
| ChildNet-Palm Beach | 6 | 12 | 15 |
| Children's Network of SW Florida | 14 | 14 | 10 |
| Citrus Health Network | 75 | 59 | 48 |
| Communities Connected for Kids | 3 | 5 | 5 |
| Community Partnership for Children | 1 | 2 | 8 |
| Family Support Services- Suncoast | 24 | 16 | 12 |
| Children's Network Hillsborough | 44 | 20 | 17 |
| Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnership of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024) | 59 | N/A | N/A |
| Family Partnership of Central Florida | N/A | 73 | 60 |
| Northwest Florida Health Network-West (Formerly Families First Network) | 51 | 48 | 37 |
| Family Integrity Program | 9 | 5 | 5 |
| Family Support Services of North Florida | 33 | 27 | 26 |
| Heartland for Children | 28 | 17 | 20 |
| Kids Central, Inc. | 3 | 11 | 14 |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Kids First of Florida, Inc. | 8 | 8 | 10 |
| Northwest Florida Health Network-East | 18 | 21 | 10 |
| Partnership for Strong Families | 3 | 5 | 10 |
| Safe Children Coalition | 13 | 23 | 24 |
| Statewide | 436 | 395 | 352 |

Statewide data shows a gradual decline in reported employment among young adults in EFC over the past three fiscal years. This trend aligns with increases in secondary education enrollment, suggesting that more participants are choosing education as their qualifying activity rather than employment. As young adults prioritize completing high school or obtaining equivalent credentials, fewer may be simultaneously engaged in employment, contributing to the observed decrease in employment reporting.

Continued monitoring of employment participation, alongside education trends, will help inform program planning and ensure that young adults are supported in balancing educational attainment, workforce readiness, and long-term self-sufficiency.

Employment (Aftercare)

While employment or school enrollment is not an ongoing eligibility requirement for Aftercare services, young adults are expected to engage in activities that support progress toward self-sufficiency. These activities are intended to assist young adults in developing financial stability and preparing for independence. Employment is one indicator of progress toward these goals.

Table 4 presents the number of young adults who received Aftercare services and recorded a period of employment during the past three fiscal years.

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

| Lead Agency | 2022-2023 | 2023-2024 | 2024-2025 |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Brevard Family Partnership (now Family Partnerships of Central Florida) | 9 | 10 | N/A |
| ChildNet-Broward | 5 | 5 | 9 |
| ChildNet-Palm Beach | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Children's Network of SW Florida | 5 | 0 | 4 |
| Citrus Health Network | 22 | 41 | 28 |
| Communities Connected for Kids | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Community Partnership for Children | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Family Support Services- Suncoast | 2 | 10 | 8 |
| Family Partnerships of Central Florida (combined Brevard Family Partnership and Embrace Families as of 5/11/24) | N/A | 17 | 10 |
| Children's Network Hillsborough | 5 | 25 | 10 |
| Embrace Families (now Family Partnerships of Central Florida) | 21 | N/A | N/A |
| Northwest Florida Health Network-West (formerly Families First Network) | 31 | 13 | 8 |
| Family Integrity Program | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Family Support Services of North Florida | 5 | 6 | 6 |
| Heartland for Children | 11 | 10 | 12 |
| Kids Central, Inc. | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| Kids First of Florida, Inc. | 8 | 0 | 1 |
| Northwest Florida Health Network-East | 0 | 2 | 3 |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Partnership for Strong Families | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Safe Children Coalition | 4 | 7 | 5 |
| Statewide | 131 | 156 | 116 |

Source: OCWDRU #1169, FSFN Data Repository

Statewide data indicates a decline in recorded employment among young adults receiving Aftercare services in FY 2024-25 compared to the previous fiscal year. This trend may reflect varying levels of engagement with employment activities, differences in service focus, or transitions of young adults into other Independent Living programs. Continued monitoring of employment outcomes within Aftercare will help inform service planning and identify opportunities to better support young adults in achieving financial self-sufficiency.

Housing

Housing young adults within the Independent Living programs presents ongoing and complex challenges due to varying placement requirements, funding structures, housing availability, and individual readiness for living independently. Requirements differ across programs, which can further complicate housing access and stability.

For young adults in EFC, housing placements must be approved by their Lead Agency and meet the level of supervision identified through the Supervised Living Arrangement Assessment. Approved housing options for EFC include licensed foster homes or group homes, host homes, transitional living programs, shared housing, dormitories, assisted living facilities, residential treatment facilities (such as substance abuse treatment programs or Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children certified safe houses), placements licensed by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and individual housing.

In contrast, PESS and Aftercare services do not require Lead Agency approval of living arrangements. As a result, housing challenges for participants in these programs are often more closely tied to limited availability of affordable housing, insufficient income to support their housing, access to appropriate supports, and individual readiness to maintain stable housing. Regardless of program participation, the Department maintains a responsibility to ensure that young adults have access to safe and stable housing to support successful transitions to independence.

Housing Specialist Pilot Program

As previously reported in the Department's 2024 response to the Council's recommendation for a statewide housing specialist, the Department implemented a three-year pilot program funding a Housing Specialist position at three Lead Agencies: Kids Central, Inc., Communities Connected for Kids, and Northwest Florida Health Network. These agencies were selected based on survey data indicating high EFC housing costs, limited capacity to administer Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) housing vouchers, and readiness to integrate a housing specialist role.

The purpose of the Housing Specialist positions is to strengthen community partnerships, identify housing opportunities and funding sources, and apply creative problem-solving to address housing barriers. To assess the effectiveness of this model and determine scalability, the Department is actively overseeing and monitoring implementation across pilot sites, including tracking, hiring and onboarding timelines, role alignment and consistency in practice. The Department is also gathering lessons learned related to recruitment and retention of the Housing Specialist positions, documenting emerging best practices and innovative strategies and reviewing implementation approaches that support stronger coordination with housing providers and public housing authorities. These elements will inform continuous improvement and guide future statewide planning.

Housing Specialists were fully established at each selected Lead Agency during FY 2024-25 and collectively reported several early successes, including:

- Improved collaboration with local Continuums of Care, which coordinate homelessness response systems under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- An increase of at least nine additional EFC placements through host homes (Kids Central, Inc.: 4, Northwest Florida Health Network: 5)
- Increased community awareness of Independent Living housing needs
- Greater accountability among transitional living programs through enhanced communication and oversight
- Reduced EFC housing expenditures, helping Lead Agencies EFC expenses remain within budget
- Acquisition of a \$15,000 grant from Truist Bank by Kids Central, Inc. to support Independent Living housing needs

As part of the Housing Specialist Pilot, Northwest Florida Health Network implemented a mid-fiscal year referral and tracking process. While the data represents partial-year results, they provide early insight into housing stability outcomes:

- Of 67 housing referrals received, 93 percent of young adults maintained their original placement
- Of referrals submitted, 34 percent requested supportive living arrangements, 25 percent requested shared housing or host homes, and 17 percent requested individual housing.

Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Vouchers and Legislative Updates

The establishment of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with local public housing authorities to administer FYI housing vouchers remains a barrier across all three pilot agencies. Northwest Florida Health Network has made progress by securing an MOU with the Tallahassee Housing Authority and is in the process of administering its initial allocation of 25 FYI vouchers.

The enactment of section 409.14525, F.S., through Senate Bill 584 (Housing Supports for Young Adults) has increased focus on strengthening partnerships between the Department, Lead Agencies, and public housing authorities. The Department is hopeful the statutory requirement for formal agreements will expand access to FYI vouchers statewide and continues to monitor both legislative implementation and the effectiveness of the Housing Specialist Pilot in supporting young adults in securing stable housing.

Housing Trends in Extended Foster Care

Chart 3 displays approved supervised living arrangements for young adults enrolled in EFC during FY 2024-25. Data for ages 18-20 reflect standard supervised living arrangements, while data for age 21 reflect young adults extended to age 22 for an additional year of EFC participation.

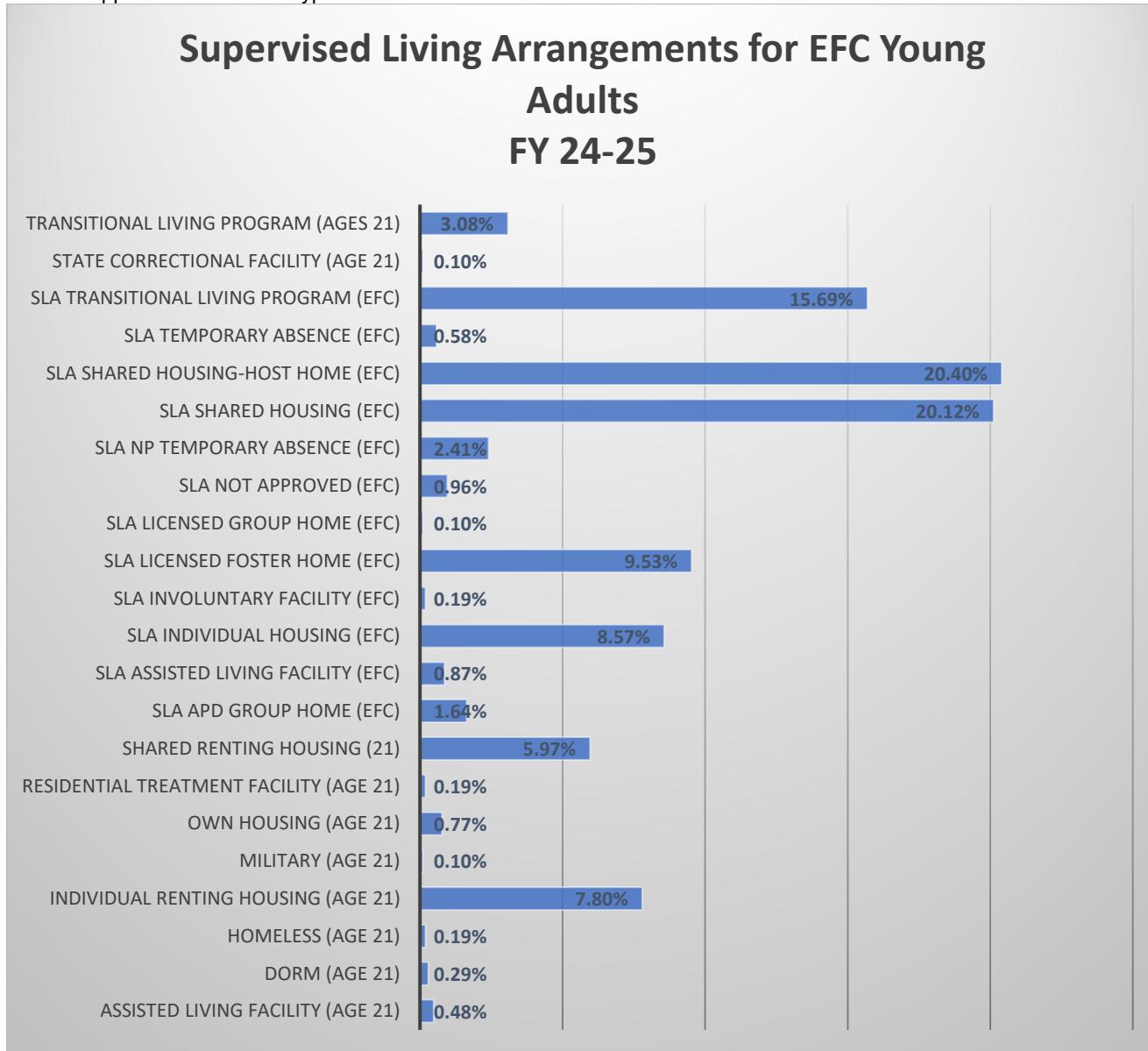
The use of Transitional Living Programs (TLPs) continues to increase statewide, rising from 13.72 percent of placements for ages 18-20 and 2.35 percent for age 21 in FY 2023-24 to 15.69 percent and 3.08 percent, respectively, in FY 2024-25. TLPs typically provide enhanced supervision, housing, oversight of qualifying activities, transportation assistance, life skills development, and access to supportive adults.

Use of host homes for ages 18-20 remained relatively consistent with the prior fiscal year, while shared housing increased by approximately 2.5 percent. Additionally, placements in licensed foster homes for ages 18-20 increased by nearly 3 percent, while reliance in group homes declined significantly from 2.71 percent in FY 2023-24 to 0.10 percent in FY 2024-25.

A key program goal is to establish stable housing prior to young adults exiting EFC. For ages 18-20, individual housing placements increased from 7.94 percent to 8.57 percent in FY 2024-25. Although

individual housing for young adults age 21 declined slightly, shared rental housing increased, resulting in a combined placement rate that remained relatively stable across fiscal years.

Chart 3: Approved Placement Types for EFC



Financial

The Department continues to emphasize financial accountability among Lead Agencies in the management and distribution of Independent Living funds. Accurate eligibility determinations and timely data entry in the Florida Safe Families Network (FSFN) system directly affect program payments, making consistency and precision in field operations essential. In response to the Council's 2024 request for additional training related to the Title IV-E reimbursement for EFC, the Department developed and disseminated guidance in collaboration with the Department's financial office. The guidance was presented at the Spring 2025 Independent Living statewide conference.

During FY 2024-2025, the Legislature appropriated nearly \$58.9 million for Independent Living programs and services. This funding included a recurring base of approximately \$54 million, as well as

nearly \$5 million to address ongoing deficits experienced by Lead Agencies in recent years, related to Independent Living programs. These deficits are largely attributable to rising EFC room and board rates statewide. The total appropriation supports case management services, program administration, and supplements room and board payments to foster parents who provide life skills training and normalcy supports to youth ages 13 through 17. When a Lead Agency exceeds its Independent Living allocation, any overage must be absorbed through its core funding.

Table 5. FY 2024-2025 Independent Living Service Payments

| SFY24-25 GAA | |
|---|----------------------|
| 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 |
| Foster Parent COLA Growth Rate (EFC) - Rec | \$ 45,891 |
| Independent Living Expansion - Rec GR | \$ 4,894,140 |
| SFY 24-25 Appropriation | \$ 58,882,373 |

Standardized Needs Assessment

One of the recommendations in the 2024 Annual Report was the implementation of a standardized needs assessment for EFC. The Department implemented this assessment effective July 1, 2025, through a memorandum issued to all Lead Agencies and system partners. This assessment is intended to determine appropriate levels of financial support based on a young adult's individual needs, strengths, and readiness for independence.

The needs assessment supports consistent decision-making related to financial assistance while reinforcing expectations for youth engagement and responsibility. Young adults are expected to contribute toward their living expenses as appropriate to demonstrate financial management skills. As independence increases, the assessment is updated to reflect changes in the young adult's financial contribution.

The FSFN Reference Payment Guide defines an allowance as a payment made directly to an EFC young adult for discretionary expenses, such as savings, entertainment, or non-essential transportation. Allowance amounts are determined based on the completed needs assessment after ensuring that all basic needs are met.

Data regarding completion and utilization of the standardized needs assessment will be available and shared with the Council during FY 2025-26. The Department anticipates that consistent use of this tool will help clarify expectations, promote financial literacy, and support young adults' progression toward self-sufficiency.

Transportation and the Keys to Independence Program

The Florida Keys to Independence Act, enacted in 2014, established a statewide program to support youth and young adults ages 15 through 21 who are in out-of-home care, EFC, or receiving PESS. The program assists eligible participants with obtaining a learner's permit, driver's license, and automobile insurance. Since May 2024, Keys to Independence has been administered by the FLITE Center under contract with the Department.

During FY 2024-25, the Keys to Independence program achieved the following outcomes:

- 408 youth and young adults obtained a learner's permit
- 270 obtained a Florida driver's license

- 1,082 youth and young adults were enrolled statewide, with 969 remaining actively enrolled
- Approximately 649 PESS participants received services through the program since its expansion in April 2022
- 421 youth and young adults received behind-the-wheel driving instruction
- 382 automobile insurance policies were paid through the program
- Approximately 62 percent of eligible youth and young adults were enrolled, with participation fluctuating based on eligibility and activity status

Participants are deactivated from the program if no progress toward obtaining a learner's permit or driver's license is recorded for a period of one year.

In addition to services provided through Keys to Independence, transportation needs are addressed during completion of the My Pathways to Success Plan. Young adults enrolled in Sunshine Health's Pathway to Shine Medicaid plan remain eligible for transportation to medical, dental, and behavioral health appointments, as well as up to three social transports per month. For young adults participating in EFC, transportation costs related to qualifying activities are also considered through the standardized needs assessment.

Health and Well-Being

Young adults who age out in Department's custody at age 18 and were receiving Medicaid remain eligible for coverage until age 26. Most young adults are enrolled in Sunshine Health's Pathway to Shine, the Child Welfare Specialty plan. Representatives from the plan play an active role in supporting the young adult's health and well-being by participating in Transition Plan staffings beginning at age 17, providing direct services and assistance, and maintaining ongoing communication with Independent Living field staff to address emerging needs.

Many young adults remain enrolled in the Pathway to Shine plan until age 21, gaining access to expanded benefits designed to support health, stability, and successful transition to independence. These benefits include:

- Specialized Care Management
- Targeted transition planning in coordination with Lead Agencies to address healthcare needs and social determinants of health, such as housing, education, and employment
- Youth-focused workshops and training on navigating the health care system
- Partnerships and coordination with agencies and programs serving young adults in transitional independent living
- A monthly benefit of \$50 for over-the-counter items, including hygiene supplies, baby formula, medications and vitamins
- Additional supports such as swim lessons, childcare, tattoo removal, education assistance, vital records support, grocery benefits and tutoring assistance and
- Transition Assistance Funds, consisting of a one-time payment of up to \$500 for young adults transitioning out of foster care or EFC between the ages of 18 and 21 to assist with rental deposits, utility connections, or essential household items.

The implementation of the Young Adult Receiving Services Report (YARS) has enhanced the Department's ability to monitor health care engagement and service utilization. This on-demand report provides timely information on recent medical appointments and service providers, allowing Independent Living staff to proactively support young adults' health care needs and intervene when gaps are identified.

Reducing high-risk behaviors and promoting overall well-being remain key priorities for the Department. During FY 2024-25, a statewide reporting tool was developed to monitor the completion and timeliness of My Pathway to Success Plans, which are central to assessing young adults' current needs and

planning for self-sufficiency across all Independent Living programs. These plans address health, education, employment, housing, and other factors critical to successful transitions.

Reporting on plan completion became available in November 2024. Initial data showed that only 34 percent of young adults had a plan completed within the previous six months at the time reporting began. Following implementation of the monitoring tool, completion rates improved steadily throughout the fiscal year. By June 2025, 56 percent of young adults had a plan completed within the previous six months, and 74 percent had at least one plan completed since turning 18.

Table 6. Percentage of completion of My Pathway to Success Plans for young adults in Independent Living programs

| | My Pathway to Success Plan Completion (entered within the last 6 months) | My Pathway to Success Plan Completion (at least one entered post 18) |
|----------|---|---|
| November | N/A | 34% |
| December | N/A | 56% |
| January | 44% | 59% |
| February | 46% | 62% |
| March | 49% | 66% |
| April | 57% | 71% |
| May | 58% | 73% |
| June | 56% | 74% |
| Annual | 50% | 69% |

Continued emphasis on timely plan development and updates every six months is expected to further strengthen service coordination, reduce risk factors, and improve health and well-being outcomes for young adults participating in Independent Living programs.

Connections

The Department recognizes the critical role that stable, supportive relationships play in the successful transition of young adults from foster care to independence. For young adults with lived foster care experience, supportive adult connections are especially important due to factors such as limited familial involvement, exposure to trauma before and during Department involvement, educational disruptions, and barriers to achieving self-sufficiency. Research consistently shows that the presence of at least one caring and reliable adult can significantly improve long-term outcomes for individuals with trauma histories. Feedback from site visits and training with the Independent Living field further underscores the lasting impact of these relationships.

The Department continues to actively promote the development of supportive adult connections, mentoring relationships, and positive peer networks. Lead Agencies and their providers have expanded efforts to hire young adults with personal foster care experience to serve as peer mentors, offering relatable guidance and support during the transition to adulthood. In addition, youth voice groups continue to expand statewide, playing an important role in shaping improvements to foster care and Independent Living services and informing policy and legislative initiatives.

The enhanced My Pathway to Success Plan, along with statewide training initiatives, places strong emphasis on identifying and strengthening adult support networks. Supportive adult relationships are discussed during plan development and reviewed during subsequent updates. The Department monitors timely plan completion through monthly reporting to Lead Agencies and tracks documentation of supportive adult connections for young adults active in Independent Living programs.

Statewide data for FY 2024–25 demonstrates substantial progress in documenting supportive adult connections. The percentage of young adults with a recorded supportive adult connection increased

from 56 percent in July 2024 to 80 percent in June 2025, reflecting a concerted effort to expand and formalize these relationships. In addition to tracking participation, the quality of supportive connections is reviewed through the Office of Quality and Innovation's targeted Independent Living reviews conducted twice annually.

Table 7. Percentage of young adults active in Independent Living program with a supportive adult connection

| | Supportive Adults Connections |
|-----------|-------------------------------|
| July | 56% |
| August | 54% |
| September | 69% |
| October | 70% |
| November | 72% |
| December | 75% |
| January | 77% |
| February | 76% |
| March | 78% |
| April | 81% |
| May | 82% |
| June | 80% |
| Annual | 72% |

Recent expansion of the Hope Florida initiative further strengthens efforts to connect young adults with caring and committed mentors. Hope Florida – A Pathway to Promise supports youth transitioning from foster care by pairing them with trained mentors who provide guidance, motivation, emotional support, and assistance in building skills and accessing resources. Through partnerships with Guardian ad Litem volunteers and the Department of Elder Affairs' Hope Heroes, youth aging out of foster care are matched with mentors who help them navigate adulthood. Additionally, young adults may access support through the Office of Continuing Care until age 26, where Hope Navigators assist with connecting to community resources and navigating complex systems of care.

Conclusion

Taken together, the Council's recommendations, Department's response, data, and information presented in this report demonstrate continued progress in strengthening Independent Living services while also underscoring the complexity and the importance of focused supports the transition to adulthood for young people with lived foster care experience. Participation in Extended Foster Care and Postsecondary Education Services and Support continues to increase, and statewide efforts to improve housing strategies, financial accountability, health supports, and documentation of supportive adult connections reflect meaningful system advancement.

At the same time, persistent barriers, particularly housing stability, consistent implementation across regions, and the need for continued cross-system alignment, remain central to achieving the statutory goals of safety, stability, and self-sufficiency. The Department prioritizes and values the Council's ongoing partnership and will continue working collaboratively with the Council, Lead Agencies, and stakeholders to strengthen performance, expand effective practices, and support improved outcomes for young adults transitioning from care.