

HEARING ON PATHWAYS TO INDEPENDENCE:  
SUPPORTING YOUTH AGING OUT OF  
FOSTER CARE

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HEARING  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORK AND WELFARE  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS  
SECOND SESSION

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JANUARY 17, 2024

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United States House Committee on  
**Ways & Means**  
**CHAIRMAN JASON SMITH**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
January 10, 2024  
No. WW-06

CONTACT: 202-225-3625

**Chairman Smith and Work & Welfare Subcommittee Chairman LaHood  
Announce Subcommittee Hearing on  
Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**

House Committee on Ways and Means Chairman Jason Smith (MO-08) and Work & Welfare Subcommittee Chairman Darin LaHood (IL-16) announced today that the Subcommittee on Work & Welfare will hold a hearing on supporting youth aging out of foster care. The hearing will take place on **Wednesday, January 17, 2024, at 2:00PM in the Sam Johnson Room located in 2020 Rayburn House Office Building**.

Members of the public may view the hearing via live webcast available at <https://waysandmeans.house.gov>. The webcast will not be available until the hearing starts.

In view of the limited time available to hear the witnesses, oral testimony at this hearing will be from invited witnesses only. However, any individual or organization not scheduled for an oral appearance may submit a written statement for consideration by the Committee and for inclusion in the printed record of the hearing.

**DETAILS FOR SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN COMMENTS:**

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All submissions and supplementary materials must be submitted in a single document via email, provided in Word format and must not exceed a total of 10 pages. Please indicate the title of the hearing as the subject line in your submission. Witnesses and submitters are advised that the Committee relies on electronic submissions for printing the official hearing record. All submissions must include a list of all clients, persons and/or organizations on whose behalf the witness appears. The name, company, address, telephone, and fax numbers of each witness must be included in the body of the email. Please exclude any personal identifiable information in the attached submission.

Failure to follow the formatting requirements may result in the exclusion of a submission. All submissions for the record are final.

**ACCOMMODATIONS:**

The Committee seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you require accommodations, please call 202-225-3625 or request via email to [WMSubmission@mail.house.gov](mailto:WMSubmission@mail.house.gov) in advance of the event (four business days' notice is requested). Questions regarding accommodation needs in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats) may be directed to the Committee as noted above.

**Note:** All Committee advisories and news releases are available on the Committee website at <http://www.waysandmeans.house.gov/>.

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## HEARING ON PATHWAYS TO INDEPENDENCE: SUPPORTING YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2024

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORK AND WELFARE,  
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 12:13 p.m., in Room 2020, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Darin LaHood [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Chairman LAHOOD. The committee will come to order.

I want to welcome our witnesses here today.

And this is our Work and Welfare Subcommittee hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.

So welcome our committee members here this morning, and a good afternoon to everyone.

I especially want to thank our witnesses that have traveled during some—a little bit of treacherous weather. So, want to thank you for your commitment and dedication to getting here for this important hearing.

My name is Darin LaHood. I am honored and proud to be the chair of the subcommittee. I represent the 16th District of Illinois, covering much of central and northwest parts of our State.

This bipartisan child welfare hearing marks the second that we have had this Congress, reflecting the shared dedication of the subcommittee members to address pressing issues facing foster children.

Our first hearing last year, titled “Modernizing Child Welfare to Protect Vulnerable Children,” was held in September of last year and laid the groundwork for the committee to examine reauthorization of Title IV–B, which expired in 2021.

This second hearing is an opportunity to evaluate the current landscape of services available to youth in foster care and ways to redesign Federal child welfare programs to reduce fragmentation and duplication.

While many of our discussions have focused on young children entering care, the goal of today’s hearing is to uplift the voices of nearly 150,000 youth ages 14 to 21 in the Nation’s foster care system and the 19,000 youth who are aged out of care each year.

Foster youth often lacks strong connections to families or mentors and need support finding pathways to independence. Basic

milestones such as graduating from high school, pursuing higher education, and maintaining stable employment pose distinct challenges.

Many of us can recall the support of parents and teachers, neighbors, coaches, and mentors who played vital roles in our own lives. Unfortunately, many foster youth lack these critical support systems.

Alarming statistics reveal the hardships faced by youth in foster care. Twenty percent become homeless, 70 percent are arrested by the age of 26. Only 55 percent are employed, and 24 percent are enrolled—only 24 percent are enrolled in postsecondary education or training. These statistics should deeply concern all of us.

We should note, however, that some progress has been made. Last year, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released a comprehensive data report titled “Fostering Youth Transitions 2023.” The report highlights significant gains in improving outcomes for foster youth over the past two decades. These include, one, a decrease in group homes and residential care; number two, increased kinship placement for foster youth; and number three, a decrease in youth entering the foster care system.

The data also highlight persistent challenges. More than half of older youth in foster care lack permanent families and age out of foster care because they were never reunified with their biological family or adopted from foster care.

Many young individuals in foster care face obstacles such as severed connections with birth families, homelessness, criminal records, limited opportunities for postsecondary education and training, and challenges entering the workforce.

Despite the availability of federally funded youth programs, less than half of eligible—benefit from these resources. That is an alarming statistic.

One stat from the Casey Foundation report that stood out to me is the finding that only 25 percent of youth in foster care have access to foster care services under the John Chafee Foster Care Program.

The Chafee program was authorized to address specific needs of youth in foster care. Yet some States underutilize allocated funds. In my home State of Illinois, only 5 percent of youth—of foster youth receive services at any point in their time in care. This is perplexing and should not be acceptable.

Youth in the foster care system navigate a maze of Federal programs, and, if anyone understands government bureaucracy, it is our foster youth. Reducing overlap in administrative complexity would ease the burden on youth struggling to navigate the assistance available to them.

This committee has an opportunity to ensure better alignment of programs as we consider reauthorization of Title IV–B.

The stories and research of our witnesses who will share today will illuminate the experiences of growing up in foster care for many youths in America. This presents an opportunity for continuing our bipartisan collaboration on this subcommittee on the meaningful solutions for America’s most vulnerable children.

I am honored to welcome our witnesses today. I eagerly anticipate your testimonies, your stories, and your life experiences, and

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to each of you for your willingness to be here today and share your stories.

With that, I am pleased to recognize the gentleman from Illinois, the ranking member, Mr. Davis, for his opening statement.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to thank you for holding this hearing so that our subcommittee can hear from youth who have experienced foster care. Their voices must shape our work.

To start with, though, I have to acknowledge the ongoing dysfunction in the Republican Conference that continues to prevent the House from governing.

Last session's chaos, infighting, and extreme proposals prevented all but a handful of laws from enactment. Today, we are just 2 days from a government shutdown, our fourth near miss.

This perpetual crisis promotion prevents us from addressing real problems like child poverty, the childcare crisis, and helping older foster youth.

Older youth make up a very small share of the youth population, but their experiences make up a disproportionate share of the foster care system's shame. They are more likely to experience multiple placements, live in institutions, suffer abuse within the system, and run away.

Each year about 20,000 youth age out of foster care without a family or loving adult to guide and support them. Youth who age out are less likely to finish school or go to college, and more likely to become teen parents, live in poverty, endure food insecurity, and experience homelessness. These outcomes are appalling, and we must do more to help them.

All of this happens even though many of these youths have loving family members or friends who want to welcome them into their families or parents who just need a little extra help to get back on track.

When we enacted the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2018, older youth fought by our side to prevent—for prevention services to help families address challenges and avoid foster care. As we implement that landmark law, my north star for action remains listening to these youth's voices as they continue to challenge us to help connect them to their families, while making them and their families stronger.

Foster youth have told me that they need connections with loving adults and to stay in touch with their families, especially their siblings. They need the basic building blocks of independence that all teens need: an education, a driver's license, a safe place to live, a plan for the future, and the array of supports that parents provide to their young adult children, supports that don't just stop because they turn 18 or 21. These youth need us to never, ever give up on making sure they are part of a family—a family that loves them unconditionally.

I am deeply proud to have helped shape some landmark laws to address key challenges in child welfare, including providing guardianship opportunities in 2008, helping families avoid foster care altogether in 2018, and helping older foster youth avoid homelessness during the pandemic.

Today, I look forward to hearing from our expert panel and my colleagues about ways to address ongoing challenges.

Despite the internal challenges facing this Congress, I believe we can make real progress to help older foster youth. I look forward to working with my colleagues to move forward.

And I ask, Mr. Chairman, unanimous consent to enter into the record statements from my colleagues Congresswoman Moore and Congresswoman Sánchez.

I thank you very much and yield back the balance of my time. Chairman LAHOOD. Without objection, those statements will be admitted for the record.

[The information follows:]



U.S. Representative Gwen Moore written testimony for the record.

**Work & Welfare-Subcommittee Hearing “Pathways to Independence  
Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care”**

Wednesday, January 17, 2024; 2pm ET

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Thank you to each of our witnesses for being here today.

I am pleased that we are engaging in this discussion about the best way to support our foster youth. Most of you are aware, improving the foster care system is one of my foremost priorities on Capitol Hill- both in my capacity on Ways and Means and as the Chair of the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth.

In terms of today’s topic, this is my main point: **we have to walk with foster youth through their *entire* journey into adulthood.**

There are many factors that we must consider in our efforts to support youth during the process of aging out foster care. This includes: the benefits and shortfalls of extended foster care, access to healthcare, access to housing, educational pursuits and preparation for foster youth becoming active members of the workforce, mentorship opportunities, and so much **more** that goes into a successful transition into adult life.

With that said, I am particularly glad that we are also hearing from several youth with lived experience as transition aged youth today- these are the experts we rely on to make effective child welfare policy. I want to highlight that one of our witnesses, Ms. Behr, who participated in the recent Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth Shadow Day in which former foster youth are paired with a Member of Congress for a day. She exemplifies the exact type of advocate that Shadow Day works to bring to Members across the Hill for opportunities to learn from lived experience.

As much as I wholeheartedly agree with my colleagues that this hearing is critical to our shared goals of ensuring the welfare foster youth as they enter the adult world, I would be remiss not to mention the irony of this hearing being conducted by my Republican colleagues at this time. A government shut down will do nothing to help support our foster youth, including those who are aging out.

I look forward to working with all of my colleagues on Ways and Means to support our foster youth.

I would like to comment on a few considerations that I believe are important to youth aging out of care. These remarks are informed by the valuable input that I have heard from a variety of former foster youth over my years in Congress.

**First**, one of the federal governments most effective tools that many states use to assist youth in the process of aging out of care are extended foster youth programs. However, as stated in our witness' testimonies, these programs are far from perfect and often under-utilized.

In Wisconsin of those foster youth who participated in National Data Base, only 13 percent of those remained in extended foster care once they reached age 19.

I am hopeful that through learning from their input, we can improve these programs such that they are worthwhile for more youth to engage in.

**Second**, I remain concerned about their access to health care. Congress must continue to ensure that foster youth maintain access to healthcare, such as Medicaid, as they transition out of the child welfare system.

A few years ago, I got to meet Dasha (DJay) Joi, who was introduced to me through the CCFY Annual Shadow Day - the very program which our witness Rebekka has also participated. DJay shared with me his own struggles to secure necessary healthcare in his young adulthood.

But this challenge is more than just anecdotal. In Wisconsin, only about 50 percent (half) of 19 year old foster youth secured medical insurance in 2021, either through Medicaid or otherwise. Former Foster Youth not in care at age 19, reported the figure 82 percent of this population had secured medical insurance, including 55% of these being through Medicaid.

This number's successes of the youth represented in this data have undoubtedly been effected by the measures enacted in the in the *SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act*- which took steps to ensured former foster youth can maintain their Medicaid coverage even if they change states during their transition into adult life.

However, there is still more work to be done to ensure that 100 percent of these youth can maintain their healthcare regardless of their participation in extended care.

**Third**, I and several of my colleges are committed to ensuring current and former foster youth have access to housing.

We know that the highest portion of former foster youth that face housing insecurity and homelessness into adulthood are those that aged out of foster care. We also know that housing insecurity for children and young adults is a significant barrier to success at all levels of education as well as participating in higher education.

**Fourth**, an additional unfortunate phenomenon we see in older foster youth in Wisconsin and elsewhere are the difficulties they face in completing higher education. In Wisconsin, 88% of those in a given cohort surveyed for the National Data Base were enrolled in some form of education at age 17. *However*, the same youth cohort reflected that only 38% percent of those were enrolled in formal education by the time they reached age 19.

This trend is not unique to my state.

**Fifth**, it is important that Congress focus on the current and future employment of foster youth both for their benefit and the benefit of America's workforce at-large.

For aging out foster youth, their ability to participate in the workforce is all the more significant to their personal well-being than we see for most of their counterparts that have not been a part of the foster care system.

Ensuring that foster youth have the opportunity to successfully enter the trades, attend college, or are otherwise prepared for the next career is another area that Congress can work to improve.

**Finally**, I would like to further emphasize the importance of mentorship to youth aging out of care. Thank you to several of our witnesses who shared their impactful experiences with peer mentors while in transition during your testimony. We need to do more to help provide supportive mentors/adults who can help these young adults through this challenging time.

I am pleased that this Committee wants to listen to the important voices of those with lived experience in foster care as well as others who hold key roles in the foster care system on this important topic. I hope we will turn this hearing into actual effective legislation that will help improve their well-being. I am proud of the work we are doing today and thank you again to all who are participating in this important hearing.



MEMBER:  
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As my colleagues have emphasized today, youth aging out of foster care make up a uniquely vulnerable population who need considerable care and support.

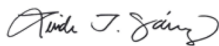
There is a foster family agency in my district who directly serves older youth and youth aging out of the system. This agency, A Greater Love Foster Family Agency, works closely with children and teens entering the system to match them with suitable and loving foster homes in Los Angeles County.

A Greater Love emphasized the need for individualized placements for older youth, a population who are often unprepared to leave the system. When these youth are matched with families who support them, support the importance of education and job training, financial literacy, and even drivers' education, they have considerably more success than those who are placed in unsupportive homes or group homes.

They also spoke about the difficulty in placing LGBTQI+ youth. Children and teens who identify as LGBTQI+ need to be placed in homes that can care for them, and where they will be safe from discrimination. A 2014 study done by UCLA found that 12.9% of LGBTQI+ youth reported being treated poorly in the foster care system compared to 5.8% of non-LGBTQI+ youth. This study also found that LGBTQI+ youth have more foster placements on average than non-LGBTQI+ youth.

These youth experience more discrimination, more difficulty being placed, and more bullying from other youth than non-LGBTQI+ youth. This discrimination, on top of navigating the trauma and difficulty of the foster care system, can leave these children even less prepared to enter adulthood.

That, coupled with a lack of comprehensive services to help them transition, often leaves these children without options when they exit care. A Greater Love spoke about their ideal world, where comprehensive and accessible services would exist to support youth throughout this transition. Financial literacy programs, job training, resume building, and community networks to support these youth as they start their young adult lives. Unfortunately, though these programs exist, they are often under-funded, under-staffed, and under-utilized. I urge my colleagues to consider the needs of some of our most vulnerable constituents as we continue to hear firsthand from some of these former foster youths.



Linda T. Sánchez  
Member of Congress

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Davis, for your opening statement.

We will now introduce our witnesses here today. Our first witness is Mr. Todd Lloyd, who is a senior policy associate from the Jim Casey Program at the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Washington, D.C. Our second witness is Ms. Rebekka Behr, and she is a former foster youth from Tallahassee, Florida.

Mr. Kiefer, I am going to skip you for a second there and go next to Jordan Otero, who is a former foster youth from Muncie, Indiana.

Want to welcome all of you here.

And I will now turn to Mr. Lloyd Smucker of Pennsylvania to introduce Mr. Kiefer.

Mr. SMUCKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is a true honor to welcome my constituent Will Kiefer, my friend, and his son Kenny here today to share their family's story and their work working with at-risk youth in my district in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Will is the executive director and founder of the Bench Mark Program, which is a fitness-based mentoring initiative which works with underserved youth, many of whom have had experience in foster care or the juvenile justice system. They serve over 100 young people every day through diverse programs, including weightlifting, as I mentioned.

And I think we will all learn something from Will's testimony today. I am really looking forward to hearing what he has to say about how we can better prepare at-risk youth to transition to adulthood. I know I am always inspired by the work that he does.

And, Will, I am inspired by your heart for these young people, and I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Smucker.

And welcome, Mr. Kiefer, and to all of you.

I would also note, we were supposed to have a fifth witness today, one of my constituents, Gabe Foley, who unfortunately, due to the weather, he tried to get here, multiple cancellations, was unable to. But I want to recognize and ask unanimous consent to submit his testimony for the record.

[The information follows:]

**Gabriel Foley**  
**Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee,**  
**Subcommittee on Work & Welfare**  
**Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**  
**January 17, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Work and Welfare. My name is Gabriel Foley (he/him), and I'm proudly representing the state of Illinois. I'm grateful to the Chair and Ranking Member for their leadership and for listening to and acting on recommendations from young people like myself.

I am a former youth in foster care who now works with child welfare organizations across the country to enhance services and support for children, youth, and families, including FosterClub whom I'm here with today, and recently obtained my Bachelor's degree in sociology from Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois.

My adoption story began very young, as I entered care at only one-month-old, and quickly began the cycle of finding placements, seeing a rotation of housing moves, and facing the uphill battle of building new social groups in the face of constant change. I would face this for nearly 14 years and it was daunting. I constantly felt like the "other" in the room, confused by what being a youth in care meant and why it mattered to the extent that both my family and peers emphasized.

This label followed me, and I didn't receive respite from it when working with my service providers. Instead, it was my foster parents who worked to relieve the anxiety that came with being a youth in foster care. They went out of their way to ensure I experienced normalcy – or that I experienced life and its "normal" events as much as possible, regardless of my status in child welfare. These efforts helped show me the love and compassion that parents can provide, and I was able to work diligently with my foster parents to achieve adoption.

I found permanency before high school, joining a family that also adopted three biological siblings. All four of us faced similar confusion and uncertainty around being a youth in care, and I remember countless late nights when my siblings and I sat on the floor of my bedroom all night long discussing these confusions. These conversations were incredibly empowering. For the first time in my life, I felt confident that I had a strong support group to come home to. I was able to share concerns, worries, and anxieties with my parents and siblings without worry about how I may be perceived or if I was correct in opening up. My parents worked diligently to bring together myself and my siblings into one cohesive family unit. They were transparent and took the time to discuss questions that myself or my siblings had about growing up in care or worries we had about fitting in with the rest of the family.

Even as I found permanency and connected with my siblings, I still struggled to know what resources I was eligible for or how to pursue them. I remember discussing with other youth in care throughout high school about whether or not Chafee and Independent Living funding was real – as both myself and my peers had seen articles about the funds but never heard about what we could do to access those funds. I opted for the pessimistic viewpoint, beginning my first year of college at Bradley University with no knowledge of post-secondary education supports – meaning I had to work two jobs on top of school just to make ends meet. It wasn't until I was 19 that I learned how to access Educational Training Vouchers (ETV) resources available to youth who had experienced foster care, like me, that would support my education.

Around that time, I also learned about Illinois' State Youth Advisory Board through flyers offering free meals and invites from peers. This board provides a platform for youth with child welfare experience, engaging them with professionals that built their capacity to facilitate and present, gather and analyze data, and partner on or lead projects in conjunction with child welfare professionals across the state. The board was led through a partnership with Be Strong Families and was comprised of youth 14 years old and older and featured representation from across the state, that met either regionally when in-person meetings were available, or statewide when virtual calls were preferred. It offered a variety of opportunities, including quarterly report-outs to the director of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in Illinois about challenges facing transition-aged youth and a partnership with lawyers from across the state to draft and propose legislation in the state of Illinois. I was admittedly quiet and nervous when I first began attending these youth advisory board meetings but was quickly enamored by the platform that they offered youth and young adults. They showed me the impact that engaging lived experience can have and instilled within me a confidence to inspire change that I had never felt before. After growing up timid of my status in child welfare, the Youth Advisory Board taught me that I had nothing to be ashamed of and showed me the difference that sharing my experiences could make.

Since I was young, it has been my dream to use my voice for positive change in the child welfare world. That's exactly the opportunity that the Illinois Youth Advisory Board provided me, as I was able to partner on multiple state Senate Bills and House Resolutions, partner with other forms of lived experience including working alongside groups of biological parents and foster parents, as well as groups of child welfare professionals, lawyers, and other important child welfare partners. The Illinois Youth Advisory Board also connected me with the Capacity Building Center for States, which allowed me to begin helping connect youth to resources and engagement opportunities at a much larger scale. .

To say what I learned at 19 was life-changing would be an understatement. Accessing ETV funds gave me the support that allowed me to dedicate significantly more time to school, as well as joining the state youth advisory board showed me the power of my own voice and the voice of other youth in care. Both set me on the path that's ultimately brought me in front of you all today.

My adoption, accessing ETV funding, and joining Illinois' state youth advisory board may be the three greatest moments of my life. They are the moments that provided me the passion for improving child welfare, the support to achieve a bachelor's degree, and the understanding of just how powerful engaging lived experts can be. Finding permanency, accessing resources, and finding a platform are what have put me on the path to speak in front of you all today.

Efforts such as extended foster care have provided youth in care with expanded access to resources, and increased awareness of the importance of lived experience engagement. With them has come increased attention towards the unique needs and challenges that transition-aged youth face – and a fantastic momentum to find new and creative ways to address these needs. Title IV-B reauthorization will only continue this momentum, helping build a world where youth are able to pursue permanency and normalcy with full knowledge of all the supports and resources available to them.

I believe there are two ways this can be accomplished:

1. Make sure all young people are supported in permanency with family and have permanent, life-long connections. This can be accomplished through increased focus on permanency, particularly



for transition-aged youth, and a focus on connecting those youth with post-permanency supports.

- a. It's my understanding that Title IV-B is flexible funding to states to support safe and stable families for children and youth. I recommend that Congress continue making family permanency a priority for Title IV-B and strengthen it as a priority so more youth can have positive family outlines like I have.
2. Expand opportunities for individuals with lived experience – those of us with firsthand knowledge of being in foster care – to contribute to designing, delivering and evaluating the services, resources and programs our peers who are still in care need.

Thank you to Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Work and Welfare for allowing me to share my thoughts and experiences, I very much appreciate your time.

Chairman LAHOOD. Gabe is a former youth and a valued constituent from Peoria, Illinois. He is now utilizing his journey to contribute towards improving outcomes for youth in care through both Federal and State policy, and I want to thank him for his commitment and dedication.

With that, I will now turn to our witnesses. And, Mr. Lloyd, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to give your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF TODD LLOYD, SENIOR POLICY ASSOCIATE  
FOR THE JIM CASEY PROGRAM, ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION**

Mr. LLOYD. Thank you.

Good afternoon, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Todd Lloyd. I am a senior policy associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Casey is a private philanthropy that invests in research, data, and innovations to build brighter futures for children, youth, and young adults.

Prior to joining the Foundation, I worked in the child welfare field in Pennsylvania, first as a county caseworker in York County and later in statewide roles, including positions where I oversaw monitoring and technical assistance across the Commonwealth's 67 county agencies that administer child welfare programs to youth. I also served as policy director of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Thank you for inviting me here today to provide some context about youth in foster care and programs that serve them. I will highlight key data trends. I will also share policy recommendations that have been informed by our work with young people who have firsthand experience in foster care.

Today, nearly 150,000 young people ages 14 to 21 are in foster care. They typically have been in foster care for 25 months. Some entered foster care as very young children, others as teens. A third of the teens have experienced foster care more than once in their lifetime.

The primary reason teens enter foster care is neglect. Often the circumstance is family instability, poverty, and other family hardship.

The committee's reauthorization efforts today can build on prior legislative reforms to Titles IV-B and IV-E to achieve two equally important goals for youth: preventing foster care involvement for youth whenever possible and promoting positive outcomes for youth who do come into foster care.

Briefly, here is an example illustrating how States utilize and coordinate Titles IV-B and IV-E to stabilize and strengthen families.

Since the passage of the Family First Act, more than 40 States have taken the option to offer Family First prevention programs. The Family First Act was a significant achievement by Congress to appropriately focus on helping families sooner and prior to foster care. However, under Family First, Title IV-E reimbursement for services is limited to programs that achieve a certain evidence base in the clearinghouse, and eligibility is limited to, quote, candidates for foster care.

An example from Nebraska shows how Title IV-B complements Family First and can offer unique flexibility to States to provide a

broader array of services that are not yet included in the clearing-house and to families who are struggling but not yet eligible under Title IV–E.

In Nebraska, nearly half of children from birth to age five who are in foster care have at least one parent who was formally in foster care themselves.

With Title IV–B funding, States can provide supportive community-based services to young parents before there is a crisis that results in a child becoming a candidate for foster care. In other words, Title IV–B funding plays a critical role in preventing inter-generational involvement of families in the child welfare system.

I will now share several findings from the Foundation's recent data. First, more children in foster care are benefiting from kinship connections. This is a positive trend. Today, nearly 60 percent of teens who are in foster care are placed in a family setting, a result of a 40 percent increase in kinship care over the last 15 years and Federal legislative reforms to support kin.

A concerning trend, however, is that permanency rates for youth are ticking down. Less than half of youth in foster care who are ages 16 and older will leave foster care to legal permanency through reunification, adoption, or guardianship.

Youth mental health needs are significant and often unmet.

There is extensive underutilization of Chafee services that help foster youth transition successfully to adulthood. Each year, less than a quarter of all eligible foster youth receive a Chafee service, such as mentoring and life skills training.

I will close with several recommendations. Others are included in my written testimony.

We urge Congress to more closely align Federal reimbursement that incentivizes desired outcomes. One approach is to incentivize the best practice of family-based foster care by delinking or increasing eligibility for Federal reimbursement, which would encourage placement in family-based foster care.

Additionally, increase reimbursement rates for kinship placements, address declining rates of permanency by specifying in the purposes of Title IV–B that funds should focus on permanency goals specifically for youth, including preventing foster care.

Also, enhance overall performance and accountability of these serving programs by making the Title IV–B plans outcome-focused. Address the underutilization of the Chafee Program and improve the quality, delivery, and impact of its services.

I commend the committee for its legacy of legislative accomplishments to improve child welfare and welcome the chance to discuss further.

Thank you.

[The statement of Mr. Lloyd follows:]

Todd Lloyd, MSW  
 Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives  
 House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
 Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care  
 January 17, 2024

Good afternoon, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Todd Lloyd, and I am a Senior Policy Associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private philanthropy building a brighter future for the nation's children, youth and young adults. We invest in research, data and innovations that strengthen child welfare practice and policy and support family well-being, so all young people will have the relationships, communities, employment, and educational opportunities they need to thrive.

I joined the foundation in 2015 and work with colleagues and partners to advance public policy improvements in child welfare at state and national levels. Prior to joining the foundation, I held many positions in child welfare in Pennsylvania. I served as policy director at Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. Before that, I was responsible for statewide monitoring and technical assistance across the Commonwealth's 67 county child welfare agencies, with a focus on the state's Chafee or independent living programs that serve youth in foster care, as well as a focus on community-based family centers funded by the state's Title IV-B program. I began my 25-year career in child welfare at a county child welfare agency in York, Pennsylvania.

Thank you for inviting me to come before you today. I commend the committee for its legacy of legislative accomplishments to improve child welfare. I'm pleased for the opportunity to share information. My oral remarks will focus on three areas. Further discussion and data are provided within my written testimony.

First, I'll provide context about the population of youth in foster care and highlight policy reform opportunities to drive better outcomes for youth and families. Congress has championed a number of foster care reforms, and yet, through our ongoing work in the field, we know there's opportunity to address new needs and ongoing challenges. Second, I'll share findings from a data report the Casey Foundation issued last year illustrating foster care and service trends over 15 years. The data show areas of progress as well as areas our nation and states can do better to prevent entries into foster care and promote better outcomes for youth during and after their foster care journeys, specifically by strengthening their connections to family, school and work.

Lastly, I'll share policy recommendations that are shaped by data and what we've learned by listening to and working with young people who have firsthand experience in foster care. We believe their insights provide a roadmap for reform that will spur a next generation of policy and programmatic improvements.

#### Understanding the needs of youth in foster care and opportunities for policy reform

I'll begin with a bit of context about youth in foster care. Today there are nearly 150,000 young people ages 14 to 21 in foster care, and they typically have been in foster care for 25 months.<sup>1</sup> Some of these youth entered foster care as very young children, others as teens, but a third of them have experienced foster care more than once in their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> The primary reason teens enter foster care is neglect.<sup>3</sup> Issues and circumstances of neglect are often grounded in family instability, poverty and other family hardship.<sup>4</sup> Together, Title IV-B and IV-E programs provide resources and opportunities for communities to help meet these very needs.

One of the primary goals of foster care is to nurture the health and safety of children in a short-term or temporary way while also focusing on helping all children leave foster care to safe and stable families. Unfortunately, we are falling short. Young children in foster care are more likely to return to their families or experience adoption or legal guardianship, but more than half of teens ages 16 and older will not — and will age out after reaching age 18.<sup>v</sup> This equates to nearly 20,000 young people aging out annually.<sup>vi</sup> These youth face a steep climb on the road to adulthood, including setbacks in education, higher rates of mental health needs, higher risk of homelessness and other hardship.<sup>vii</sup> We can and must do better to help each of these young people have the relationships, support and opportunities to succeed.

When we create better outcomes for young people, there are broader benefits to society. The Foundation calculated societal costs related to youth who age out compared to their peers who do not experience foster care. In short, we've identified \$4.1 billion in costs associated with each annual cohort of youth who age out related to lower employment earnings, incomplete education, homelessness, early parenting and juvenile justice involvement.<sup>viii</sup>

Reauthorization of the Title IV-B program provides a timely opportunity to build on prior legislative reforms to improve outcomes for youth. As the committee considers reauthorization, we encourage you to prioritize two equally important goals for youth:

1. Preventing foster care involvement for youth whenever possible; and
2. Promoting positive outcomes for youth who do come into foster care.

Title IV-B programs are largely focused on strengthening families. We encourage that continued focus and recommend targeted new investments and policies that can help communities leverage Title IV-B to meet the needs of children and youth in coordination with services provided through Title IV-E programs.

How can Title IV-B enhance and further the goals of Title IV-E programs? Here are several examples:

- The Family First Act spurred states to **prevent youth from entering foster care** by making all youth at risk of entering foster care eligible to receive evidenced-based services that treat mental health needs, address substance use disorders and provide parent education. Title IV-E funds are available for these services from programs with a certain evidence rating by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (Family First Clearinghouse). This makes Title IV-B funds a vital resource as they position states to fund effective prevention programs that are not yet authorized by the Family First Clearinghouse and they serve youth and families in need who are not eligible under Title IV-E.<sup>ix</sup>
- The Fostering Connections Act spurred states to strengthen family connections and **promote legal permanency** through investments in kinship caregiving. The Act also offered federal reimbursement to states to support youth who are permanently placed with kin, and to extend foster care when youth opt to remain in foster care after age 18, which affords additional time for them to be connected to family and positively impacts rates of education, employment and housing.<sup>x</sup> Title IV-B funding can further promote family connections and permanency by supporting youth who return home to their biological families, and by providing parent education and support to youth who age out of foster care and become young parents.
- The Chafee program focuses on services to youth in foster care who are 14 and older, including parenting youth, to help them prepare for and succeed in adulthood. Title IV-B funding can further help prepare youth for adulthood by connecting young parents to respite services and parent education classes, addressing mental health needs, and navigating housing assistance and other key needs.

To further illustrate the importance of flexible funding under Title IV-B, I offer this example. Data analysis by Foundation partners in Nebraska shows that nearly half of children from birth to age five who are in foster

care in Nebraska have at least one parent who was formerly in foster care themselves.<sup>xi</sup> Title IV-B can help prevent this intergenerational involvement, because it offers states flexibility on eligibility and funding to serve families in their communities, so the child welfare system can be safely avoided altogether. In contrast, Title IV-E reimburses states for a narrower set of child welfare interventions and for a narrower set of eligible families. For instance, a young parent who experienced foster care is not eligible for Title IV-E prevention services until their child is at imminent risk of entering foster care.

In short, as a flexible funding source, Title IV-B can be directed upstream in communities to help struggling families stabilize as well as downstream to help ensure youth in foster care also achieve lifelong family, such as reunification, adoption and kinship guardianship.

#### What we know: Key findings on the experiences and outcomes of youth in foster care

I'll now share a few key findings from the Foundation's 2023 data report illustrating foster care and service trends over the last 15 years.<sup>xii</sup> What you'll hear is that there are areas of progress as well as areas where we need to be doing better. [Also see charts in the addendum, Page 8.]

1. First, a positive national trend is increased kinship connections and family-based foster care placements for youth. Today, nearly 60% of teens in foster care are living in a family setting compared to half of them 15 years ago. This increase is entirely related to the growth of kinship care, which has been the result of federal Title IV-E and IV-B reforms. Kinship care is best practice for several reasons: Children and youth in kinship care have more stable placements and fewer school changes and are more likely to achieve permanency and not re-enter foster care.<sup>xiii</sup> Importantly, kinship care helps children maintain connections to their cultures and communities.
2. A concerning trend is that permanency rates for youth are ticking down. Less than half of youth in foster care who are age 16 and older will leave foster care to join a permanent family, whether that is through returning to their biological parents or by joining a lifelong family through adoption or legal guardianship.
3. The youth we work with have identified an increased need for mental health resources, inclusive of trauma supports and services, to succeed into adulthood. Specifically, they are seeking both increased traditional clinical supports and also less traditional but effective models like peer-supports and engagement in pro-social activities that encourage the development of healthy and lasting relationships with adults and peers.
4. Another concerning trend is the underutilization of services and programs aimed at helping teens succeed in school, work, and life. These services, typically provided through the Chafee program, include mentoring, life skills training and education support.

As mentioned earlier, there are about 150,000 teens and young adults currently in foster care. However, nearly 450,000 youth are eligible for Chafee services because youth between the ages of 14 and 21 remain eligible after leaving foster care (and up to age 23 in about 30 states). Unfortunately, each year, less than a quarter of all eligible foster youth receive any Chafee service. Further analysis of Chafee services also finds that only half of all eligible youth will ever receive Chafee services throughout their foster care journey.

1. We believe several factors drive these low rates of service delivery, including lack of awareness among youth of available services; funding constraints; lack of alignment between services offered and highest areas of need; and a historical focus by agencies on serving those they believed would "age out" which is only a portion of those who are eligible.
2. You'll recall that approximately 20,000 youth a year age out of foster care, typically at age 18. A powerful alternative is extended foster care, which serves youth up to age 21 in most states. However, too few young people are experiencing the benefits of these programs. In fact, less than one quarter of those youth are remaining in extended foster care by age 19.

3. Overall, the outcomes at age 21 for youth who have experienced foster care are poorer than outcomes for their peers who do not experience foster care, which include being:
  - a. less likely to complete high school or obtain a GED;
  - b. half as likely to enroll in higher education and job training; and
  - c. about 8% less likely to be working.
  - d. A third lack stable housing, and over a third report experiencing incarceration.

#### Policy recommendations for improving youth outcomes

As you have heard, the data show areas of progress and promise. There is much room for improvement. The following recommendations are informed by these findings and also draw on our understanding of what's working and not working, based on the Foundation's extensive work in the field and through broader research findings.

- **Reimagine federal child welfare financing through enhanced rates of federal reimbursement that incentivize delivery of effective services and align federal investments with desired child, youth, and family outcomes.** The most recent survey of states' spending on child welfare services found overall spending on child welfare is \$15.2 billion annually, and nearly 60% is state and local contribution.<sup>16</sup> Further federal financial participation is merited so states and communities have much-needed resources to deliver the array of services that safely prevent youth from entering foster care, reduce aging out and support youth and families following foster care.
  - Ensure federal financial participation in the costs of all family-based foster care placements through de-linking Title IV-E foster care funding eligibility that is locked within the poverty standard of the defunct 1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) and require states to reinvest any cost savings into efforts to better support these populations. Precedents include the 2008 federal "de-linking" of adoption subsidies and 2018 de-linking of Family First Act prevention.
  - Incentivize states to support kinship foster care arrangements through a significantly enhanced IV-E Family Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP).
  - Reinvest and redirect all federal and state Title IV-E savings from reductions in use of foster care and group care placements into Title IV-B investments that target areas needing improvement within a state's Child and Family Services Plan.
  - Consider federal funding increases in Title IV-B programming that are tied to Title IV-E program performance. For instance, rate of expenditure under Title IV-E prevention.
  - Work with the Energy and Commerce Committee to comprehensively address youth mental health services for this population across funding streams including IV-B, IV-E, and Medicaid, which serves as the primary funding source for health services for young people in and aging out of foster care. This could include considering an enhanced Medicaid FMAP for community-based youth mental health services targeted to meet the needs of youth with significant trauma and mental health treatment needs, such as: mobile crisis response and stabilization services, enhanced care coordination services like high fidelity wraparound, in-home clinical therapeutic services for youth and their families, and peer-support services for youth and their caregivers.
- **Address declining rates of youth permanency and promote safe and stable families for youth:**
  - Increase federal investment in kinship connections and supports, including kinship navigators which are supported through Title IV-E and Title IV-B.
  - Specify in the purposes of Title IV-B that funds should focus on family permanency goals for youth, including preventing the need for foster care by strengthening families, as well as supporting goals of reunification, guardianship and adoption for youth in foster care.
  - Support research and community-based organizations working to build further evidence for interventions eligible under Title IV-E prevention programming, and particularly for interventions

already effectively meeting the needs of young people from a range of communities and backgrounds.

- Enhance performance and accountability of youth-serving programs. A key feature of Title IV-B is the state plan requirements. These plans, also known as Child and Family Services Plans (or five-year IV-B plans) are intended to help states integrate and coordinate federal funding sources into a cohesive child welfare system that supports children, youth, and families.<sup>xv</sup> We urge the committee to re-examine the plan requirements with the goal of making them drivers of accountability and more outcomes-focused. One important way to enhance accountability is to have ongoing input from youth, parents and other caregivers who are involved in the system; their feedback identifies what's working and what's not working.
- Continue to strengthen and support best practices through the Court Improvement Program, funded through Title IV-B. Quality court proceedings, including youth involvement in their hearings, are associated with positive outcomes for youth.
- **Address the underutilization of the Chafee program and improve the quality and impact of its services:**
  - Increase awareness of Chafee services among youth by requiring that states notify them about available services, through caseworkers and during court hearings, starting at age 14.
  - Double the overall investment in the Chafee program, as was done in 1999, so state and local agencies have adequate, flexible, and predictable resources given the expanded age eligibility made by the Family First Act. This will increase delivery of services and help lead to better outcomes in school, work and family. Along with increased investment, strengthen accountability measures to improve results. Specify accountability measures that require meaningful input and involvement from youth and families who receive services from the system, such as youth boards, youth surveys, family feedback opportunities.
  - Improve impact of federal investments by enhancing the array of services. For example, building on best practice, require that HHS/ACF, in collaboration with young people from foster care and other stakeholders, develop a list of benchmark services to guide agencies in updating their Chafee programs and specify best practices around engaging and notifying youth. Incentivize agencies to improve delivery of services by encouraging greater reliance on community-based organizations.
- **Remove barriers to youth accessing foster care beyond age 18:**
  - Eliminate eligibility criteria to better ensure participation in the programming — any youth aged 18 in foster care should be eligible.
  - De-link Title IV-E financing eligibility from the defunct 1996 AFDC program so state and federal cost sharing can occur for all participating youth, which will encourage states to establish and enhance these programs for youth. Require states to reinvest any cost savings into additional programming to support this population.

#### Closing

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about ways to promote better outcomes for youth and their families. The Casey Foundation stands ready to assist the committee by providing further information, data, and insights to guide your decisions. Congress has a tremendous opportunity through Title IV-B and other federal programs to support pathways to independence and improved outcomes for older youth, prevent harmful and costly outcomes, and promote greater well-being so youth and families can thrive.



### Addendum

#### Examples of Public-Private Partnership

Following the enactment of Chafee in 1999, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative established partnerships in over a third of states to help young people who experience foster care get connected to the resources, relationships, and opportunities they need to thrive. After a quarter century of partnership there are new insights, data, and lessons from many young people who have given back by sharing their lived expertise to improve policy and programming. In the 16 states of the Jim Casey Initiative's network, Foundation investments and technical assistance bolster public-private partnerships. In 2022, 40% (nearly \$34 million) of the \$85 million leveraged by the network's state partners were private dollars provided by 39 different foundations, businesses, and several local United Ways. The Casey Foundation invested an additional \$992,000 in grant funding.

With private philanthropic partners, the Foundation supports the Journey to Success campaign, so policymakers can receive state-specific data and hear directly from young people to learn about challenges and opportunities for youth in foster care in their states.

The Foundation is also a partner in the public, private and philanthropic Thriving Families, Safer Children effort working in 22 jurisdictions to strengthen resources that keep families together. Federal partners include the Children's Bureau and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control.

#### Examples of prevention and other programs that work

Evidenced-based programs for youth and families that have been rated by the Family First Clearinghouse include:

- **Motivational Interviewing (MI)** is a communication technique and method of counseling designed to engage ambivalent or skeptical young people in positive behavior change. MI reduces illicit substance and alcohol use by connecting young people to their own meaning, personal value, and capacity for change. Child welfare agencies in Utah and Washington, D.C., have invested in digital training tools to coach case managers in MI techniques to empower and motivate the youth they serve. It is rated "well-supported" by the Family First Clearinghouse.
- **Strong African American Families (SAAF)** is a group-based parenting program designed for families with youth ages 10–14. Rated "well-supported" by the Family First Clearinghouse, SAAF builds on families' strengths to prevent substance use and other risky behaviors. SAAF promotes youth goal setting and attainment, resistance of risky behaviors and acceptance of parental influences. A version of the program for teens is available but has yet to be reviewed by the Family First Clearinghouse.

Hundreds of prevention services and programs have been recommended for review by the Family First Clearinghouse, but many have yet to be evaluated, and others need support to build further evidence to meet the Family First Clearinghouse requirements. For smaller community organizations delivering effective services, building evidence is both time-intensive and costly. Many need resources to develop both the family strengthening programs and the rigorous research. Public and philanthropic partners can help. The Foundation supports the expansion of several efforts, including:

- **Connect**, an evidence-based parenting support curriculum. With trainings tailored for parents, foster parents and kinship caregivers. Connect addresses social, emotional and behavioral adjustment for adolescents by strengthening family bonds, with the aim of keeping families together or supporting their reunification after foster care. Connect is rated "well-supported" by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse but has not yet been reviewed by the Family First Clearinghouse.

**Extended foster care:**

Research on **extended foster care** finds that older youth in care at age 19 were more likely to have a high school or GED and more likely to be employed at age 21 than youth who were not in extended foster care at age 19. They were less likely to experience homelessness between ages 19 and 21.<sup>xvi</sup> One study found these outcomes for each additional year of foster care beyond age 18: increased odds of enrolling in college by 10-11 percent; increased odds of earning a high school credential by 8 percent; and decreased odds of experiencing homelessness or couch surfing between ages 17 and 21 about 28 percent.<sup>xvii</sup>

**Kinship care:**

Research on **kinship care** shows that children and youth placed with relatives and close family friends experience fewer placement changes, have lower odds of placement disruptions and fewer school changes. The children express more positive feelings about their placement when placed with kin. Additionally, higher levels of permanency are achieved with lower reentry rates. Cultural identity and community connections are better preserved.<sup>xviii</sup>

**Financial education and matched savings:**

Young people (ages 14-26) become financially capable, gain experience with banking, and acquire assets or pay expenses that support their life goals through the Casey Foundation's Opportunity Passport® program. Participants complete a financial education curriculum, open a personal bank account, and save money to meet their goals. Participants receive a match of at least 1:1 on savings intended for approved purchases, such as a car or rental deposit.

A recent analysis found asset purchases by participating youth are associated with better outcomes. For example, Opportunity Passport participants who purchase a vehicle have 4.1 times higher odds of reporting they have adequate transportation for school and work. Participants who purchase a vehicle have 1.5 times higher odds of reporting they have employment. Participants who purchase an education asset have 3.7 times higher odds of reporting being in school. Participants who purchase a housing asset have 1.8 times higher odds of reporting they have stable housing.<sup>xix</sup>

**Promoting permanent families for older youth instead of aging out**

The SOUL Family legal permanency option, designed by young leaders with foster care experience with support from the Casey Foundation, proposes a promising alternative to aging out. It offers a new way to build strong families for young people ages 16 and older. In Kansas, public and private partners are exploring how this approach would allow young people to establish permanent legal relationships with one or more adult caregivers, maintain ties to their birth parents and siblings, and receive mentoring and additional support from a network of caring adults. Youth in these families would receive benefits and services needed to support their learning, career preparation, housing and wellness along the path to adulthood.<sup>xx</sup>

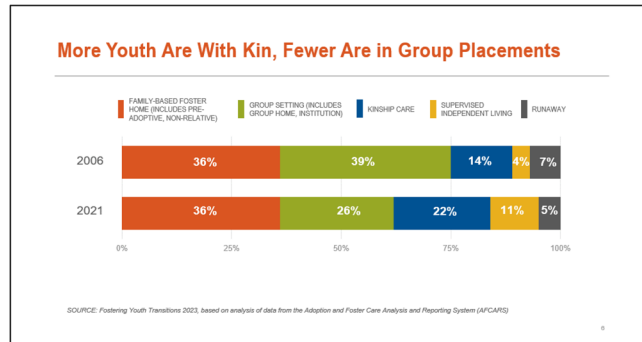
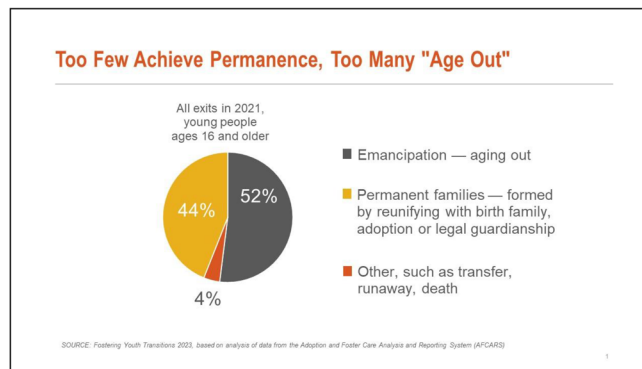
**Data charts:****Figure 1: Placements for older youth (ages 14+), 2020****Figure 2: Aging Out, 2021**

Figure 3: Chafee Services for Eligible Young People Ages 14+

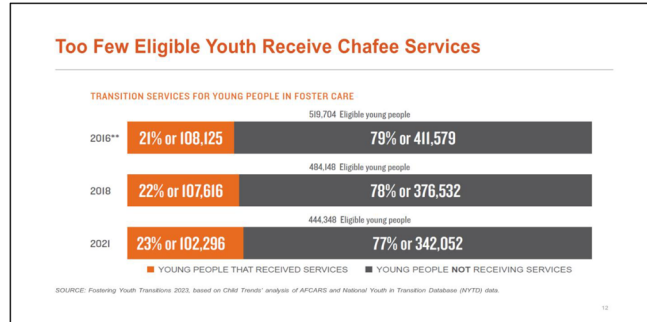
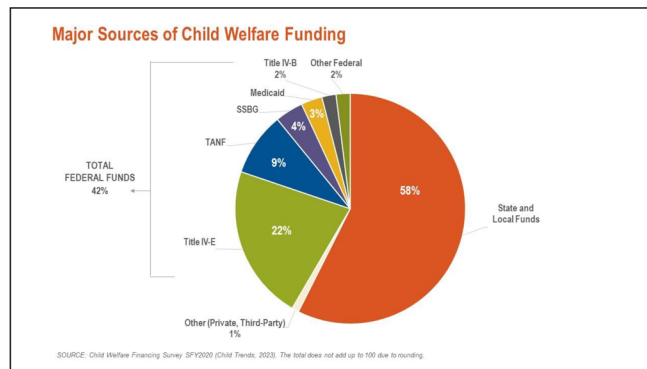


Figure 4: Child Welfare Funding, SFY 2020



For additional information, please contact Todd Lloyd, Senior Policy Associate at [tlloyd@aecf.org](mailto:tlloyd@aecf.org).

<sup>1</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2023). *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: State and National Data to Drive Foster Care Advocacy*. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/fostering-youth-transitions-2023>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> There are numerous studies exploring these intersections. See, for example: Conrad-Hiebner, A., & Byram, E. (2020). *The Temporal Impact of Economic Insecurity on Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review*. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 21(1), 157-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018756122> and McLaughlin, M. (2017). *Less money, more problems: How changes in disposable income affect child maltreatment*. Child Abuse & Neglect, 67, 315-321. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.03.006>

<sup>13</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2023). *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: State and National Data to Drive Foster Care Advocacy*. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/fostering-youth-transitions-2023>

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau (2022). *The AFCARS Report Preliminary FY 2021 Estimates as of June 28, 2022*. (No. 29). <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-29.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2023). *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: State and National Data to Drive Foster Care Advocacy*. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/fostering-youth-transitions-2023>

<sup>16</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2019). *Future Savings: The Economic Potential of Successful Transitions From Foster Care to Adulthood*. <https://aefc.org/resources/future-savings>

<sup>17</sup> Over 800 prevention programs have been recommended for review by the Prevention Clearinghouse to assess the programs' level of evidence for IV-E funding eligibility. So far, only 160 programs have been reviewed. While half of these reviewed programs have met the evidence criteria for reimbursement, only 18 programs have received a rating of "Well-Supported". See the list of programs here: <https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs-recommended-review>.

<sup>18</sup> For a summary of improved outcomes connected to kinship care, see: Redlich Epstein, H. (2017). *Kinship care is better for children and families*. Child Law Practice Today. [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/)

<sup>19</sup> Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (2023). *Community Collaboratives: The Annual Community Collaboratives Report 2022-2023*. University of Nebraska Medical Center Monroe Meyer Institute.

<sup>20</sup> The data in this section are from The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2023). *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: State and National Data to Drive Foster Care Advocacy*. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/fostering-youth-transitions-2023>

<sup>21</sup> Redlich Epstein, H. (2017). *Kinship care is better for children and families*. Child Law Practice Today. [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/)

<sup>22</sup> Rosinsky, K., Fischer, M., & Haas, M. (2023). *Child Welfare Financing SFY 2020: A survey of federal, state, and local expenditures*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/child-welfare-financing-sfy2020>

<sup>23</sup> State plans and reports are available here: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cfsp-apsr-state-reports>

<sup>24</sup> Rosenberg, R., & Abbott, S. (2019). *Supporting Older Youth Beyond Age 18: Examining Data and Trends in Extended Foster Care*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/supporting-older-youth-beyond-age-18-examining-data-and-trends-in-extended-foster-care>

<sup>25</sup> Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., & Park, S. (2018). *Report from CaIYOUTH: Findings on the relationships between extended foster care and youths' outcomes at age 21*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/improved-outcomes-at-age-21-for-youth-in-extended-foster-care/>

<sup>26</sup> Redlich Epstein, H. (2017). *Kinship care is better for children and families*. Child Law Practice Today. [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/)

<sup>27</sup> Analysis of Opportunity Passport Data System and Opportunity Passport Participant Survey data. Child Trends (2022).

<sup>28</sup> For additional details about the SOUL Family Permanency Option, see <https://www.aecf.org/blog/soul-family-permanency-option-for-older-youth-in-foster-care>.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Lloyd.  
I now recognize Ms. Behr for 5 minutes. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF REBEKKA BEHR, FORMER FOSTER YOUTH,  
TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA**

Ms. BEHR. Good afternoon, Chairman and Ranking Member, subcommittee, and guests, on this hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.

My name is Rebekka Behr, and I am here to share the challenges of my journey through foster care and advocate for improvements.

At 25, I stand before you as a graduate of the Florida State University, holding degrees in family and child sciences as well as sociology. I am fortunate enough to have the opportunity to participate in many local, statewide, and national advocacy organizations, such as the National Youth Engagement Advisory Council, Florida Youth SHINE. And today, I stand before you as a former delegate of the Congressional Leadership Academy of 2023 on behalf of the National Foster Youth Institute.

My journey in foster care began abruptly at the age of 16, where I was called out of class and was taken away from the only life that I had known without a single explanation. As my family faced challenges, the only foster—the foster care system only further divided us. While my brother and I entered foster care, my sister stayed with my mom. The separation deprived of us sibling connections, and I lost out on a supportive family during crucial years. It took 6 years post-foster care to rebuild my relationship with my little sister, and I am still cautious with my mom due to the scars left by the system.

Entering care, I was taken into a shelter where there was a constant police presence, a lack of basic necessities such as clothes, transportation to school, and the ability to see my siblings. I had gone from living with my family, who only needed minimal services, to a shelter where I never felt safe and felt that I had no one. I was not given the opportunity to live with a relative, although multiple relatives lived nearby, and I remained in a shelter for 3 months.

Transitioning to my second placement brought me to a more secure environment, allowing me to attend school daily and engage in life skills. Despite these improvements, the absence of a loving family's crucial support remained. While learning essential life skills, the limitations of comprehensive services in group home became evident.

My brother's placement was in a foster home. Though not with family, it provided a more personalized and supportive environment.

The lack of control over our living arrangements, coupled with infrequent and often disrupted sibling visits, underscore the challenges within the foster care system.

Since this is National Mentoring Month, I want to highlight the impactful role of my mentor Daniele in my foster care journey. For almost a decade, she has been pivotal in my personal development, supporting me through various challenges, including driving les-

sons, even though she is terrified of other people driving. And no, I haven't been able to drive around since I got my license.

Having a mentor when aging out of the foster care system is essential for providing emotional support, guidance, role modeling, life skill development, consistency, and trust. It significantly contributes to the successful transition to independent adulthood for individuals.

Three months before I turned 18, I visited the Florida Supreme Court and met a justice who informed the group I was with, the Florida Youth Leadership Academy, that most young people in Palm Beach County had attorneys. However, I did not have one, even though my mom did, my dad, and my brother.

After the meeting, I approached the justice and told her my situation, and she told me I would have an attorney the very next day. True to her word, I received a call from my attorney, which made a game changer—was a big game changer in gaining legal representation. My attorney made sure that I could obtain a driver's license, reconnect with my family, and navigate aging out of care.

A few weeks after I turned 18, my brother returned home to my dad and is now a successful student at the University of Florida, while playing the timpani around the country.

I am a determined adult who navigated extended foster care until college, graduating in 2020 with two bachelor's degrees, thanks to programs like Best Foot Forward, Vita Nova, and the Unconquered Scholars Program that assisted me with FAFSA scholarships and budgeting to the point that I became a homeowner at 21 and was able to study while enjoying the student life on Florida State's campus.

Exiting the system, many youth are not encouraged to pursue secondary education. Assistance with FAFSA or applications became a daunting barrier. Despite campus coach legislation, robust campus support is inconsistent. I advocate for funded legislation, in turn, well-trained individuals, additional support, and lower no-cost housing with meal plans for foster youth at every institution.

As part of the 5 percent of foster youth with a 4-year degree, I stand as a testament to resilience. While acknowledging my success, I urge the committee to consider systemic changes for others in foster care.

My powerful ask is for comprehensive, empathetic policies that empower foster youth, creating a pathway for success beyond the challenges of foster care that utilize diverse youth with lived experienced voices. Suggestions include placing with relatives or in-home support services before being taken out of the home.

My experience traveling 40 minutes to school emphasizes the need for programs like Keys to Independence, as I was often left waiting for a bus that never came.

I want to express my gratitude for your time today as I advocate for informative reform, and I hope that my story leaves you inspired to create meaningful change.

Thank you.

[The statement of Ms. Behr follows:]

Good Afternoon Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, Subcommittee, and guests on this Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care. My name is Rebekka Behr, and I am here to share the challenges of my journey through foster care, and advocate for improvements. At 25, I stand before you as a graduate of The Florida State University, holding degrees in Family & Child Sciences and Sociology. With an extensive background in the intricacies of the foster care system and a nuanced comprehension of the challenges confronting youth grappling with homelessness, I devote a substantial portion of my time to advocating for the rights of young people experiencing the foster care system.

Throughout the years I have had the opportunity to participate in many local, statewide, and national advocacy organizations such as the National Foster Youth Institute, National Youth Engagement Advisory Council and Florida Youth SHINE. Today I stand before you as a committed representative on behalf of the National Foster Youth Institute.

My journey in foster care, began abruptly at the age of 16, where I was called out of class and taken away from the only life that I knew without a single explanation - with only a promise of taking me back to my school to grab my school bag before taking me home to my dad and brother - a promise that never happened. As my family faced challenges, the foster care system further divided us. While my brother and I entered foster care, my sisters stayed with my mom. This separation deprived us of sibling connections, and I lost out on a supportive family during crucial years. It took six years post-foster care to rebuild my relationship with my little sister, and I still maintain cautious connections with my mom due to the scars left by the system.

Entering care, I was taken to a shelter where there was constant police involvement, a lack of basic necessities such as clothes, transportation to school, and the ability to see my siblings. I had gone from living with my family, who needed minimal services, to a shelter where I never felt safe and felt that I had nobody. I was not given the opportunity to live with a relative, although multiple relatives lived nearby and I remained in this shelter for 3 months.

I did not know that I had the right to see my siblings, go to school, or speak with my judge. Unfortunately, there is a constant high turnover rate of Case Managers, and I only knew the name of my first Case Manager. However, I never had the opportunity to meet one or understand the role of a Case Manager until I moved into my second placement. In transitioning to my second placement, I appreciated the move to a more secure environment where I felt safer. However, it's crucial to note that even though I was in a setting that allowed me to attend school daily, have clean clothes, and participate in weekly Life Skills courses, I still lacked the crucial support of a loving family. While I learned essential life skills such as budgeting, understanding the nuances of renting versus buying, and navigating the bus system in Palm Beach, it's important to highlight that such comprehensive services are not often accessible when residing in a group home.



Moreover, it's noteworthy that many group homes are religious-based, which can limit placement options for young individuals of different religious backgrounds. As a person of Jewish faith, I recognize the challenges this presents, as finding a place where one feels comfortable and accepted can be more challenging. I am particularly thankful that my brother was placed in a foster home, even though he wasn't with family, as it provided a more personalized and supportive environment.

Adding to the complexities, my brother and I were not given the option to live together, further emphasizing the lack of control we had over our living arrangements within the foster care system. We had gone from seeing each other every day to once a week for one hour which was often cut short or canceled if there wasn't transportation available.

With January being National Mentoring Month, I cherish the opportunity to highlight the transformative impact of mentorship in the foster care system. For almost a decade, my mentor Daniele, a product of a Mentoring Program I joined during my second placement, has been instrumental in my personal development. From supporting me through heartbreaks to guiding me in opening my first bank account, ensuring my preparation for prom, and providing unwavering support, Daniele has been a constant presence in my life. An unforgettable moment crystallized the importance of mentorship when my friend canceled on me for a movie outing. Distraught, I called Daniele, who not only comforted me but took me to spend time with her family on the beach, revealing the depth of her commitment. This incident not only marked the realization that genuine friends stand by each other but also sparked my passion for lifeguarding, a pursuit in which I compete and remain certified.

Even though my mentor refuses to let anyone drive, she helped me practice driving which was huge for me. I had taken and passed the drivers permit test at the earliest age possible in Florida - 14.5. Unfortunately, I had turned 16 right before I entered the foster care system and did not have the ability to get my license before entering care. Due to difficulties gaining my Birth Certificate and Social Security Card from my biological mom, I was unable to get my driver's license until right before I turned 18 due to a lack of legal representation - I did not know that I could even speak in the courtroom. Florida, at the time, had just passed legislation that created a Pilot Program called "Keys to Independence," which was passed with the assistance of Florida Youth SHINE Advocates. This program assists with gaining driver's licenses, insurance, and other assistance. Although I did not benefit from this, I educate others on this program and know others that benefit from it as it eliminates burdens in getting to college, work, and obstacles we face.

At 17, I attended a transitional case plan meeting to discuss my approaching 18th birthday. Unfortunately, the meeting was short-lived, and I didn't realize I could bring third-party support.

The person leading the meeting claimed my presence diverted resources from other children and suggested I should return home to my mom. This surprised me, as I wasn't aware that going back home was an option. I expressed my discomfort, explaining that my Judge or Case Managers had never presented this choice, but the person seemed indifferent. The emotional impact left me in tears, feeling unsupported in navigating this transition, with my mentor being the only source of assistance, as I lacked representation in the courtroom.

When I was 3 months out before turning 18, I had the opportunity to visit the Florida Supreme Court and meet a Supreme Court Justice who told the group I was with - Florida Youth Leadership Academy, that most young people in Palm Beach County had attorneys. For me, that was not the case. So I waited for the meeting to be done before speaking to the Justice and tell her about my situation. She asked me a single question - who was my judge? Before stating that tomorrow I will have an attorney. The very next day I received a phone call from my attorney. Gaining legal representation became a game-changer - ensuring that I obtained a driver's license, had the ability to see my family more, and that I aged out of care as a successful adult.

I am a determined, successful adult. Albeit remaining in extended foster care until I went off to college as I was told to be grateful that I could remain there and did not know that I was even allowed to leave, I found my way to college through the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement Program at Florida State University. I graduated in 2020 with 2 Bachelor Degrees because of the assistance I received from amazing programs such as Best Foot Forward - who provided me with tutoring assistance, assisting me with the FAFSA, a cell phone to assist me in college, and even helping me with moving scholarship funds around so I had financial support in the summer. The Unconquered Scholars Program - a program that assists students that have experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, or ward of the state status that allows us to have our study space, a food pantry/grocery store runs, and a campus liaison who we gained 1-to-1 support and who I get coffee with even now 4 years later.

In my sophomore year of college, my Independent Case Manager, Mike from Vita Nova, introduced me to Florida Youth SHINE—a youth-led, peer-driven organization for those in or who have experienced foster care or homelessness. FYS, known for advocacy, played a pivotal role in passing significant bills like the Normalcy Bill and Keys to Independence in Florida. Over the past 5 years, our focus has been on raising awareness about the rights and resources unknown to youth in care, such as communicating with judges, obtaining driver's licenses, and enjoying normalcy in life.

In 2023, we achieved a milestone by passing the Nancy C. Detert Champion for Children Act in Florida, ensuring regular education for youth about their rights and resources. Thanks to Champions Senator Garcia and Representative Tramont, this act marks a crucial step in empowering young individuals as they age out of the system. Youth Advocacy Organizations,

such as this, are vital for driving changes at the local and statewide levels. We are fortunate to have multiple organizations focusing on national advocacy, like The National Foster Youth Institute, dedicated to ensuring that current and former foster youth have a seat at the table alongside legislators, policymakers, decision-makers, families, and advocates.

Incorporating individuals with lived expertise from the foster care system into discussions with legislators and training sessions for everyone involved in the foster care system is crucial. Their firsthand experiences offer unique insights into the challenges and needs of those in the system. Advocacy organizations play a pivotal role in ensuring that these voices are heard at every level, enhancing understanding and paving the way for more effective and empathetic policies. This approach ensures that transition-age youth are equipped with the resources and networks needed for fulfilling lives beyond the foster care system. As someone engaged in initiatives like the National Youth Engagement Advisory Council, I've witnessed the essential role of including genuine voices in decision-making processes. These councils play a key role in shaping needs assessments, supporting cross-site youth engagement, and influencing policies to improve the overall advocacy landscape.

I am standing here before you as part of the 5% of foster youth that have graduated from a 4-year college and as a testament to resilience, determination, and the potential of foster youth. While acknowledging my success, I implore this committee to consider the systemic changes needed for the countless others navigating the foster care system. Some suggestions I would give include placing with relatives or in-home support services that can enhance the overall well-being of the youth. While I was in care, I went to school 40 minutes away - I was often waiting for a bus that never came or unable to partake in after-school activities because no one could pick me up. Having the ability to gain a license through a program such as Keys to Independence would have a momentous impact on young people in the foster care system to ensure they have the same access to normalcy as every other young 16 year old. I want to personally thank Representative Davis for recognizing that getting a driver's license is a key milestone of growing up and developing into an independent adult and creating the The Foster Youth and Driving Act.

Many youth preparing to exit the system have not been encouraged to attend a post-secondary educational institution - even being helped with the FAFSA or institutional applications can seem overwhelming and become a major barrier to going to a school or college after high school completion. As you know, once we do get to a college, we may or may not have robust campus support, despite campus coach legislation in many states. I would love to see that legislation funded along with additional qualifiers - To really create a program, to be sure, the person is trained and fully equipped to do the work, they have access to additional funding and support at each institution, every institution has on-campus housing should be required to offer low or no-cost housing to these students that include gap housing and meal plans.

It is worth considering the addition of a federal requirement for a Bill of Rights such as the recently introduced federal Foster Youth Bill of Rights Resolution as it is a historic initiative to inform foster youth nationwide about their rights while in care. Recognizing the significant variations in foster youth rights across states, this resolution highlights ten fundamental rights, including education, participation in activities, and access to health services. With endorsements from various organizations, the resolution aims to raise awareness and establish essential rights to address disparities in foster care. This critical step is essential to empower youth within the system and improve their well-being as they navigate the complexities of the foster care system.

My journey through foster care highlights the formidable challenges faced by youth aging out of the system, and I stand before you as a testament to resilience, determination, and the potential of young people who have experienced the foster care system. Separation from siblings, limited access to necessities, and struggles with the system underscore the urgent need for systemic changes. I implore this committee to consider transformative reforms, such as placing youth with relatives, bolstering in-home support services, and providing widespread access to programs like Keys to Independence for obtaining driver's licenses. My success as a college graduate is a beacon of hope, but there are barriers to post-secondary education that demand attention. I urge you to fund and enhance campus coach legislation, ensuring that every institution offers robust support, including low or no-cost housing and meal plans. My powerful ask is for comprehensive, empathetic policies that empower foster youth, creating a pathway for success beyond the challenges of the foster care system. Let my journey not be an exception, but an inspiration for meaningful change.

Chairman LAHOOD. Ms. Behr, thank you for sharing your powerful and successful journey.

We will now turn to Mr. Kiefer. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF WILL KIEFER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND  
FOUNDER, BENCH MARK**

Mr. KIEFER. Good afternoon, congressional committee members.

I will not be the most experienced or credentialed witness you will hear from today, but I will be the sole witness who has spent the last 10 years of my professional career building a system of programs that allow me to stick with at-risk youth through the toughest parts of their lives.

My name is Will Kiefer, and I am the executive director and founder of Bench Mark Program, a space where juvenile offenders, foster youth, and youth who have dual involvement in both delinquency and dependency systems can call home.

Bench Mark Program is a gym facility, a lounge, a tutoring center, a kitchen, and a career development provider. On any given day, we operate seven separate yet interconnected initiatives. We provide youth with a consistent mentor who remains connected to them for years at a time, program after program, helping them navigate life's complex challenges well beyond their 18th birthday.

I will tell you first about Julius, who is 18 years old and has been in foster care since he was 11. When I first met him, he was confined to our local detention center and shelter.

Julius had been removed from a foster home and put into a group home where he fell in with the wrong crowd and ultimately committed a gun crime. He had no prospect of being accepted into another foster home and no idea how to navigate both the delinquency and dependency systems. He had a lot of people telling him what to do but very few people helping him to do any of it.

Over the next year, Julius walked step by step through five different initiatives at Bench Mark Program without a break in services. We ultimately offered him a part-time job at Bench Mark, and now he is a high school graduate living in a group home and looking for his first full-time job.

We continue to work with him daily. He gets the undivided attention of his mentors, Anna and Cathy. They are his navigators, and they will stay involved with Julius until he tells them that he no longer needs their support.

And then we have Shylah, who is about to turn 18 years old while out on the run. She couldn't last in any of the 10-plus foster or group homes where she landed. Some of the fights she started there earned her criminal charges.

Every time that she returned to our local detention center, though, we engaged her in our programs. We became the only consistent home base in her life. Her release to our facility and our programs was one of few opportunities that she had to combat institutionalization.

After serving as a keynote speaker in front of 600 juvenile justice practitioners at a statewide conference last November, Shylah ran away from our facility one evening with nothing more than the clothes on her back. The upcoming move to another group home

and some of the good things happening to her were too much. She chose the comfort of old toxic peers over the challenge of life as a young adult in a group home.

Then out of the blue, she called me last Wednesday night as I was writing this testimony and asked if she could come back to Bench Mark. She apologized and asked when I would be in the gym next so that we can meet and make new plans for her future. We picked a date, and I promptly edited this section of my testimony to reflect this new twist in her story.

Finally, sitting behind me today is Kenneth Jackson-Kiefer, my son. I am taking him back to Washington College for the second semester of his freshman year right after this hearing.

He was introduced to Bench Mark at 14 years old after losing his biological father and brother and later his mother. For a time, he too was on juvenile probation.

My wife Karla and I fostered Kenny at 16 and ultimately adopted him, helping to prevent him from aging out of foster care himself. He has taken advantage of every opportunity available to him at Bench Mark Program and beyond, and I will let him answer any questions that you may have for him once I conclude.

Here is what I would ask this committee to remember: Number one, no one is ready to be an adult at 18 when they are told they are an adult and told to prepare to live on their own. Complete freedom is not what any of us need at that age, no matter what resources are promised to us.

Number two, unless you are an individual with incredible persistence and system know-how, youth cannot access resources made available to them as they age out of care. They need a navigator who knows the ropes, has learned the system, and can lead them through the tangle of paperwork and processes to get them what they need.

And third and finally, any program or system that we build or fund to serve youth aging out of foster care needs to be intentionally designed to pair youth with a singular long-term mentor across the span of years. This is the gold standard.

In this room today, we are gathered to discuss a complex, multi-faceted problem involving some of the most traumatized, unpredictable, and challenging youth. We are well-educated, well-funded, and well-connected. We will solve this problem. We will solve it as soon as we realize that what has allowed each of us to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood is the same thing that youth aging out of foster care need. Namely, it is the presence of a consistent, reliable, available long-term mentor who can be trusted to pick up when a kid calls year after year after year until that kid finally gets across their chosen finish line.

What is keeping us from building that type of support into our programs, our system, and our society? Answer that question, and we will have solved this problem.

[The statement of Mr. Kiefer follows:]

**Willem C. Kiefer (Bench Mark Program) Full Written Testimony**

Good afternoon Congressional Committee Members,

I will not be the most experienced witness you will hear from today. I will also not be the most credentialed witness you will hear from today. But I will be the sole witness who has spent the last 10 years of my professional career, in truth the only 10 years of my professional career, building a system of programs that allow me to stick with at-risk youth through the toughest years of their lives. My name is Will Kiefer and I am the Executive Director and Founder of Bench Mark Program. While I share no common history with the youth that I serve, I have constructed a space that juvenile offenders, foster youth, and youth who have dual involvement in both delinquency and dependency, can call home.

Bench Mark Program is a gym. Think graffiti, loud music, barbells, and punching bags. But we are also a women's strength and fitness center, a lounge, an academic center, a kitchen, and a career development provider. On any given day we operate seven separate yet interconnected initiatives. We start with a mentoring program inside our local Youth Intervention Center, which is our juvenile detention center that contains a wing for youth in foster care without a permanent place to live. Upon their release from this secure facility, especially for our students with firearm-related criminal charges, we provide a 1:1 mentoring service to get youth through the period of time when they are most likely to reoffend. This can last between 3-6 months. We then shepherd these same youth into a 6-month small group mentoring program to teach them life skills, help them polish their resume, find a job, get on track in school, and get off probation (if they are delinquent). After that program, we welcome youth into our Open Gym Program, a community fitness-based mentoring program that operates daily and has no "end date" or "graduation." Within that program, youth can workout with mentors, lift weights, box, and also get help from a tutor with their homework, or work on their resume for their job hunt. For those youth who succeed in all of those programs, we offer them part-time employment through our Student Leadership Program, an initiative that prepares youth for a regular full-time job by teaching them "the basics" of work. They learn how to dress, how to use a time clock, how to deal with performance feedback, and how to handle a disagreement with a coworker. Interestingly, the Student Leadership Program mentors are local business executives who give their time on a weekly basis to pour leadership skills into this underserved group. Student Leaders can work for us for up to a year before we help them secure a higher paying job elsewhere, and even when that occurs, we still expect to see them at our Open Gym program on a weekly basis when they are off work. Of course for youth who are not involved in the delinquency system at all, we also operate a Suspension Alternative Program in our local high school, providing an alternative to out-of-school suspension that keeps our at-risk youth in the building, connecting with our Bench Mark Program mentors and getting them back on track.

The focus is not on these initiatives in and of themselves, but rather on the fact that each of these initiatives connects to the next, resulting in an average student engagement with a Bench Mark mentor of 38-months. Most importantly, it is the access to the SAME mentor program after program that keeps our students engaged. We are there, repeatedly, in the background of our students' lives.

In 2023, 92% of our delinquent students did not reoffend while engaged in our program. 83% resolved their truancy issues. 52% secured gainful employment after just our small mentoring program, but for those student leaders who worked for us, 77% secured gainful

full-time employment. These are just a few indicators that we are on the right track. Now it's time that I introduce you to some of the individuals behind these numbers:

I'll tell you first about Julius who is 18 years old, and for all but 3 of those 18 years has lived in foster care. He cannot remember what led to his entry into foster care, but he harbors no ill feelings towards his parents. They stay in touch, and even today, he dreams of going to live with them in South Carolina. He has moved in and out of many foster homes, but when I first met him, he was confined to our Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center (a juvenile detention center with a wing for youth without a home). Julius landed there after being removed from a foster home, moving into a group home, falling in with the wrong crowd, and ultimately committing a firearm-related crime. He called his mom right after committing the crime, and turned himself in hours later. He was 16 years old, had no prospect of being accepted into another foster home, and no idea how to navigate both the Children and Youth AND Juvenile Justice System within which he now found himself. **He had a lot of people telling him what to do, but very few people to help him do any of it.** Because of his gun charge, we enrolled him in our 1:1 gun violence prevention mentoring program which enabled his daily release from the detention center under our supervision. Once he completed that program, we enrolled him in a small group mentoring program designed to teach life skills and help kids complete their probation requirements. Once he completed that program, we engaged him in our community based fitness program, allowing him to keep in touch with his same mentors and peers. His success in that program led us to enroll Julius in our Student Leadership Program, where we gave him a part time job at our organization and helped him build his resume. He walked step by step through 5 different initiatives at our organization without a break in services. We testified on his behalf in his decertification court case (moving his charges from adult to juvenile court). He got his high school diploma. To date we have worked with him for more than 2 years, and now that he is living in a group home and looking for his first full-time job, we continue to work with him. He gets the undivided attention of his mentor, Anna. She is his navigator and she will stay involved with Julius until he tells her that he no longer needs her support.

Next I'll tell you about Shylah who is about to turn 18 years old while out "on the run." Shylah's Mom gave up custody of her daughter when Shylah was just 12 years old so that her mother could move in with an older man who wanted nothing to do with Shylah. Shylah was taken into foster care and became violent when confronted by anyone whom she believed had wronged her (over the littlest things). She couldn't last in any of the more than 10 foster and group homes where she landed. Every time she returned to the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center, we engaged her in our programs. With the exception of the gun-violence prevention program, she went through all the same programs as Julius, in fact they know each other well. We became the only consistent "home base" in her life. Her release to our facility and our programs was one of few opportunities that she had to combat institutionalization. And despite our best efforts, even though she called us weekly from each placement and foster home she attended, she couldn't keep herself from getting into fights, some which resulted in criminal charges. After serving as a keynote speaker in front of 600 juvenile justice practitioners at the PA State Juvenile Court Judges Commission Conference this past November, Shylah ran off from our facility one evening with nothing more than the clothes on her back. She had purchased a phone, reconnected with negative peers from her past, and ran away to live with them until she aged out of foster care – instead of going to the group home that was set up for



her. The upcoming change and all of the good things happening to her were too much. She didn't want to wait "three more months for another group home." She fell back to the comfort of old, toxic peers instead of the challenge of life as a young adult in a group home. The only good news is that despite running away and aging out of foster care without any support, she called me last Wednesday night as I was writing this testimony and asked if she could come back to Bench Mark. She apologized to me, said that she was wrong to run away, and asked when I would be in the gym to meet with her and make new plans for her future. We picked a date, and I promptly edited this section of the testimony to reflect this new twist in her story.

Finally, sitting behind me today is Kenneth Jackson-Kiefer, my son. I am taking him back to Washington College for the second semester of his freshman year of college right after this hearing. My wife Karla and I fostered and ultimately adopted Kenny at age 16, helping to prevent him from aging out of foster care himself. When we met him, he too was dual involved in the delinquency and dependency systems. Today, he is a shining example of someone who has taken advantage of every opportunity available to him (at Bench Mark Program and beyond) and I will let him answer any questions you may have for him once I wrap this up.


In conclusion, here is what I would ask this committee to remember:

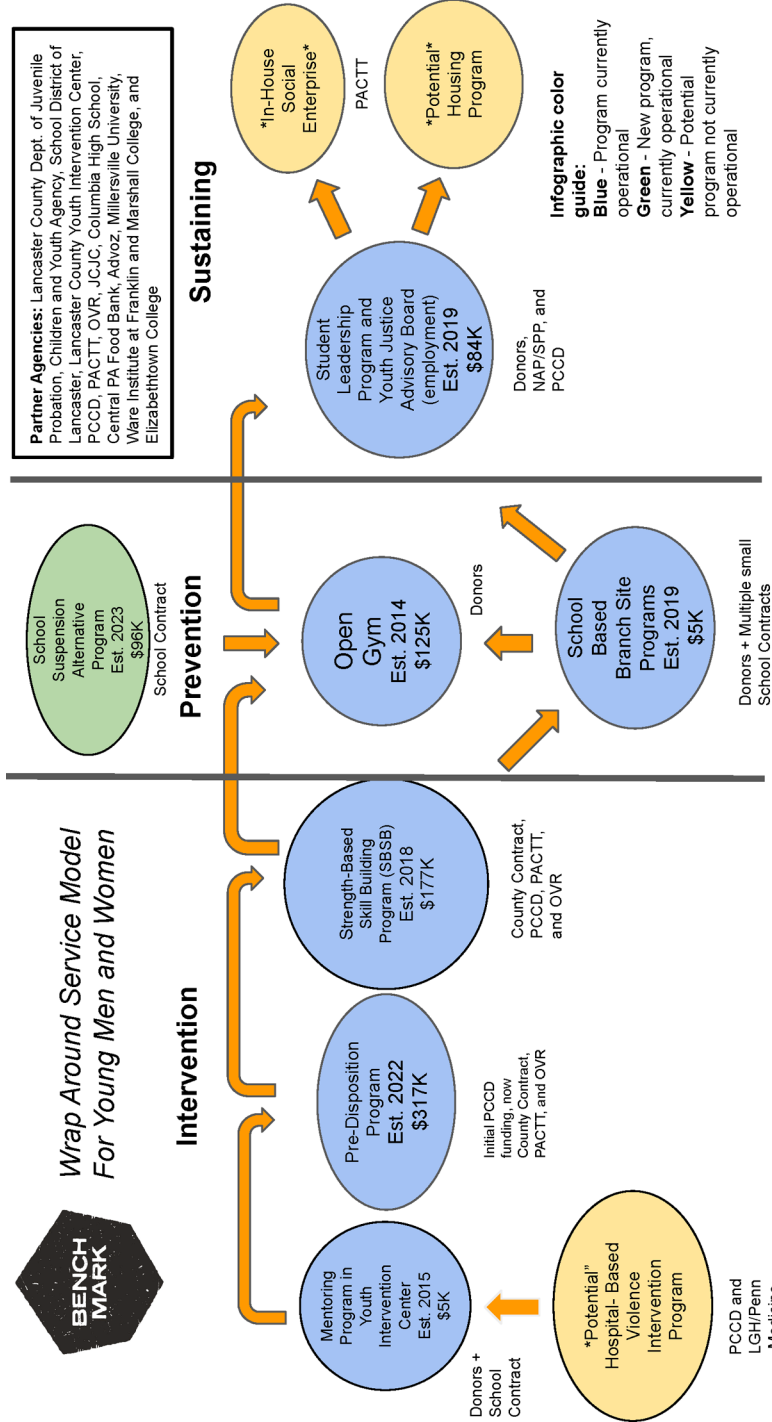
1. No one is ready to be "an adult" at age 18 when they are told they are an adult and told to prepare to live on their own. Freedom is not what any of us need at that age, no matter what incentives and resources are promised. At 18 they are still kids, in a complex and limited stage of brain development, especially those who have experienced the trauma of growing up in the foster care system for the majority of their childhood.
2. We cannot rely on the foster care system to help kids like Julius, Shylah, and Kenny when they age out. While many resources are available through the foster care system, the resources are largely inaccessible to the youth who need them. It takes an individual with incredible persistence and "system know-how" to access those resources. This is what my wife and I did for Kenny. This is what Bench Mark mentors do for their kids. We are their navigators. We know the ropes, we learned the system, and we lead them through the tangle of paperwork and processes to get them what they need. The solution lies not in changing the system, but in hiring and preparing more navigators to get youth through (and well beyond) the system.
3. Any program, system, or solution that we build or fund to serve youth needs to be intentionally designed to pair youth with a singular, long-term mentor, across many programs or in just one program. A consistent person that will be there for years at a time, accessible to the youth, until they decide that they no longer want the support. This is the gold standard, and the beauty is, it's something that we can make happen.

In this room today, we are gathered to discuss a complex, multifaceted problem involving some of the most traumatized, unpredictable, and challenging youth. We are well educated, well funded, and well connected. We will solve this problem. We will solve it as soon as we recognize that what made each of us successfully transition from young adulthood to adulthood is the same thing that youth aging out of foster care need. Namely, it is the presence of a consistent, reliable, available, long-term mentor who can be trusted to pick up when a kid calls, year after year after year until that kid finally gets across their chosen finish line. What is keeping us from building that type of support into our programs, our systems, and our society? Answer that question, and we will have solved this problem.

Exhibit A - Bench Mark Program 2023 Metrics, Internally Compiled

Exhibit B - Bench Mark Program Wrap Around Service Model w/ Program Descriptions

	Bench Mark Program 102 S Prince St Lancaster PA, 17603
2023 Compiled Statistics	Last Updated: 01/10/2024
Overall Outcomes	Data
Length of time that students across all programs stay engaged with Bench Mark via one in-person meeting at least once/month	38 months
Open Gym	
Average Nightly Attendance	68 students
Community Service Hours Completed	845
# of volunteer mentors (community members)	9
Retention (# of students who return at least once/month for 6 months)	73%
number of students who returned for services after being absent for 2+ years	14
Youth Intervention Center (YIC) Program	
Average Number of Students Served on a weekly basis	15
Percentage of students served (who are eligible for BMP services) are actually referred into a BMP services upon release	48%
Streight-Based Skill Building (SBSB) Program	
Number of referrals	46
Number of referrals who completed the program	38
Percentage of students who did not reoffend while engaged in the program	92%
Percentage of students who resolved truancy issues	83%
Percentage of students who completed community service hours	98%
Percentage of students who secured or maintained employment while engaged in the program	52%
Percentage of students who have all passing grades	74%
Percentage of students who continue to engage with Bench Mark after program completion	66%
Predisposition Program	
Number of referrals	17
Percentage of students who did not reoffend while in the program	88%
Percentage of students who successfully complete Predisposition and migrate into SBSB	82%
Suspension Alternative Program (SAP)	
Number of Referrals	36
% of referrals who complete the entire 5-day program	94%
Percentage of students who do not committ another offense (warranting suspension)	69%
Percentage of students who get back on track in school (grades, attendance)?	86%
Student Leadership Program (SLP)	
Number of students employed	13
Average length of time of employment (months)	14
Percentage of employed students who secure gainful employment following their departure	77%





## Wrap Around Service Model Program Guide

### ***Mentoring Program within the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center (YIC) -***

- Leadership program serving juveniles while they are confined to juvenile detention. Funding by School District of Lancaster

### ***Predisposition Program ("Predispo") -***

- 1:1 mentoring program serving juveniles immediately upon their release from detention, continuously until their Disposition. Initial 2-year pilot funded through a PCCD Grant. Currently seeking ongoing support.

### ***Strength-Based Skill Building (SBSB) Program -***

- Evidenced Based Curriculum serving juveniles following their Disposition and throughout the remainder of their time on juvenile probation. Funding by Lancaster County Dept. of Juvenile Probation

### ***Open Gym -***

- Community, fitness-based mentoring program serving juveniles on juvenile probation and others referred by local School Districts, Children and Youth Agency, therapy offices, and families. Funded by donations

### ***Student Leadership Program (SLP) and Youth Justice Advisory Board (YJAB) -***

- Job training program to employ successful program graduates to assist with operation of the Open Gym. Funded by donations and NAP/SPP contributions

### ***Suspension Alternative Program (SAP) -***

- 5-day, evidence based curriculum that serves as an alternative to out-of-school suspension. Funded by the School District of Lancaster

### ***School-Based Branch Site Program -***

- After-school fitness-based mentoring program that includes leadership training. Funded by participating school districts.

### ***In-House Social Enterprise -*** Screen-printing business that employs Bench Mark students. PACTT Alliance funded

**Hospital-Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Program (HVIP) -** Mentors meet with youth impacted by violent crime while they recover in the Trauma Unit of Lancaster General Health/Penn Medicine. Mentors provide case-management. Funding sought jointly through PCCD and LGH/Penn Medicine

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Kiefer, for sharing your inspiring story of you and your son both. Welcome.

We will next recognize Mr. Otero for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF JORDAN OTERO, FORMER FOSTER YOUTH,  
MUNCIE, INDIANA**

Mr. OTERO. Good afternoon, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to be here today to give my testimony.

I am here today to share my experience of how family connections, financial resources, and peer support programs have helped me navigate the world in and beyond foster care.

My name is Jordan Otero, and I am 24 years old. I graduated from Ball State University with my bachelor's degree in general studies with a concentration in social work. I am now a case manager at George Junior Republic, an agency in Indiana, where I support children and youth who are experiencing foster care. I am also a father to my 2-year-old son.

What I am going to be sharing today is by no means the average experience of foster care. I am blessed and very fortunate and very lucky to be where I am today.

With that being said, I know oftentimes it is sad stories that are told when we talk about the foster care system, but today I would like to highlight the positive impact of relationships that I have built, the financial support that I have received, and the programs that I have been a part of that all helped me succeed in my early adulthood.

My foster parents are some of the greatest foster parents ever. They have been very supportive in my life after foster care. To this day, I have maintained a great relationship with them, and my foster dad and I talk on the phone every Friday. My foster parents are people I can lean on for advice and support when I need it.

I stayed with my foster parents until I started college at Ball State University. I relied on their support and a program called Summer Bridge that is run by Foster Success in Indiana to prepare for my freshman year.

Summer Bridge provided me with the opportunity to stay on campus of a college in Indiana and earn college credits the summer before my freshman year of college. This allowed me to get adjusted to the college lifestyle and have a head start in my education.

During this time, I turned 18 and decided to enter the Collaborative Care program in Indiana, which is Indiana's extended foster care system.

While living with my foster parents, I also joined the Indiana Youth Advisory Board. I found out about this meeting from my family case manager who sent an email, and it was titled, Free \$40, go. Little did I know that this youth board would be the start of my advocacy journey.

The Indiana Youth Advisory Board allows a space for teens and young adults with lived experience in foster care to connect, share, and grow with each other. It also empowers foster youth to advocate for themselves and communicate their needs and concerns effectively.

I am still involved with Foster Success, who runs the Indiana Youth Advisory Board, and I now serve as a lead ambassador where I help younger youth prepare to engage in the board and advocacy.

One thing I would like to highlight is that my foster parents helped me in getting my driver's license and covered my insurance while I was living with them. Once I went to college, however, I couldn't stay on their insurance, and I wasn't sure how to get on my own. I was embarrassed to ask, and then I ended up driving without insurance. I lost my license for 2 years for two counts of not having insurance, and, during one of those times, I was involved in an accident.

I was then faced with the same reality that my fellow peers in the foster care system had, forced to rely on public transportation, if there is any where you live, asking people for rides and owing them favors, the feelings of being a burden to others, the feeling of being inferior because I couldn't do what most normal college kids could, or the worst is that some of my peers decided to drive without a license and dig a further hole that they couldn't get out of.

I was blessed with the fact that I knew I could get my license back, and I just had to pay my insurance. I knew it would end, but the sad reality is that some of my peers to this day can't get their license. Now, in Indiana, though, that has thankfully changed.

This past year in Indiana, I advocated alongside Foster Success for the development of the recently implemented Insuring Foster Youth Trust Fund and a \$2 million State appropriation to support behind-the-wheel driving hours and offset auto insurance costs for older foster youth to allow them to more easily get to school and to work. I believe that all States could benefit from this model that Indiana has and that every older foster youth would benefit from something like this.

I started by sharing that there are three things which contributed to my successful transition to adulthood. It is the relationships that I have built, the financial resources that I have gained from, and the programs that I have engaged in my lived experience.

I believe that all foster youth need these three things in order to be successful, and there are three ways to accomplish this: Prioritize relationships and the family placement for transitioned youth in foster care. We need relationships with supportive adults who will last far beyond our time in care.

Invest in the financial resources that meet the various needs of young people while we pursue higher education or the workforce or just finding our footing as young adults.

Ensure all young people in foster care have access to the network of peers and supportive adults. This can be through the youth advisory boards, the peer navigation programs who can help us find those right resources, or campus supports. This is critical to reduce the isolation of being in foster care and empowering us to improve the foster care system and those who are still experiencing it.

Thank you for having me today. It is truly an honor and a blessing to be here. Five minutes is not enough time to give you the full scope of the foster care system and what children and youth experi-

ence. So I urge you to meet with your lived experience youth in your home State and hear their stories and see who they are.

I want you to have the understanding that our stories are more than just testimonies and sad news articles you see, but we are people with dreams and ambitions. We are people who break the cycles of poverty and dysfunction. We are people who have achieved many successes and received accolades.

And, with the barriers we have faced, it doesn't always make sense for us to be here. Yet I sit here today, alongside my peers and others, that—we are able to be here, and we will continue to make success the expectation and not the anomaly.

Thank you again.

[The statement of Mr. Otero follows:]



**Jordan Otero**  
**Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee,**  
**Subcommittee on Work & Welfare**  
**Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**  
**January 17, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Work & Welfare.

Thank you for inviting me to be here today to give my testimony. I am here today to help you understand how family connections, financial resources and peer support programs have helped me navigate the world in and beyond foster care.

My name is Jordan Otero, I am 24 years old. I graduated from Ball State University with my Bachelors Degree in general studies with a concentration in social work. I am now a case manager at George Junior Republic - an agency in Indiana - where I support children and youth who are experiencing foster care.

My seven siblings and I were born in Gary IN, but our journeys since that time have varied. I was removed from my mother's care at the age of 2 and lived with my Grandmother until I was 15 yrs old when she developed Alzheimer's. After that, I moved around between my friend's houses and I was even homeless at one point. I then entered the foster care system when I was 17. I was immediately placed in an emergency shelter where I stayed for a month until my youngest brother's foster parents asked if I could come live with them.

I would like to highlight some of my family history and my experience with having 4 older siblings who all entered the system the day I was removed from my mother's care. I was a young child and only 1 of my younger siblings was born at the time. We were all removed from my mother's care when she and my father were arrested on six counts of neglect of a dependent and my father also had one count of battery.

My older four siblings entered the foster care system and my younger sibling and I went to stay with my grandma and that was how we grew up all of my life - separated from each other. I would see them only a few times a year at visits due to them being in residential facilities or constantly moving foster homes. Three of my four older siblings ran away from foster homes or residential and waited until they turned 18 to ditch the system. Only 1 of 4 older siblings aged out and they immediately exited care and moved away.

My parents would end up having two more children later on who would also live with my grandmother. After my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimers and went into a nursing home, my younger siblings and I were separated, either living with other relatives or staying at our friends' homes. Shortly after that, the Department of Child Services asked my mother to bring us all into the DCS office and they removed us from her and placed us into foster care. Little did they know that we had fallen through the cracks for years and were removed from her

long before they took us into foster care. I was 17 at this time when we entered foster care. They quickly found a placement for my youngest sibling who was only 9 years old at the time, but they had to place my other two younger siblings and myself into an emergency shelter which was a residential facility because they could not find placement for three teenage boys. I was there for a month before I would eventually go to my foster parents home where my youngest sibling was already placed.

I know often times it is the sad stories that are told when we talk about the foster care system but today I would like to highlight the positive impact of the relationships I have built, the financial support I have received and the programs I have been a part of that all helped me succeed in my early adulthood.

My foster parents are some of the greatest foster parents ever. They have been very supportive in my life after foster care. To this day I have maintained a great relationship with them and my foster dad and I talk on the phone every Friday. My foster parents are people I can lean on for advice and support when I need it.

I stayed with my foster parents until I started college at Ball State University. I relied on their support and a program called Summer Bridge to prepare for my freshman year. Summer Bridge provided me the opportunity to stay on campus of a college in Indiana and earn college credits the summer before my freshman year of college. This allowed for me to get adjusted to the college lifestyle and have a head start in my education.

During this time, I turned 18 and decided to enter the collaborative care program in Indiana which is Indiana's extended foster care system.

While living with my foster parents, I joined the Indiana Youth Advisory Board. I found out about this meeting from my family case manager who said "it's a free 40 dollars, go!". Little did I know that this youth board would be the start of my advocacy journey. The Indiana Youth Advisory Board allows a space for teens and young adults with lived experience in foster care to connect, share, and grow with each other. It also empowers foster youth to advocate for themselves and communicate their needs and concerns effectively. I am still involved with Foster Success who runs the Indiana Youth Advisory Board, and I now serve as a LEAD ambassador, where I help younger youth prepare to engage in the board and advocacy.

One thing I would like to highlight is that my foster parents helped me in getting my drivers license and covered my insurance while I was living with them. Once I went to college, however, I couldn't stay on their insurance, and I wasn't sure how to get my own. I was embarrassed to ask, and drove without insurance. I lost my license for two years for two counts of not having insurance and during one of those times I was involved in an accident. I was then faced with the same reality that my fellow peers in the foster care system had. Forced to rely on public transportation(if there is any), asking people for rides and owing them favors, the feelings of being a burden to others, the feeling of being inferior because I couldn't do what most normal college kids could, or the worst is that some of my peers decide to drive without a license and

dig a further whole that they can't get out of. I was blessed with the fact that I knew I could get my license back and that I just had to pay my insurance. I knew it would end but the sad reality is that some of my peers to this day can't get their license. Now in Indiana that has thankfully changed.

This past year in Indiana, I advocated for the development of the recently implemented Insuring Foster Youth Trust Fund and a \$2M state appropriation to support behind the wheel driving hours and offset auto insurance costs for older foster youth to allow them to more easily get to school and work. I believe that all states could benefit from this model that Indiana has and that every older foster youth would benefit from something like this.

I started by sharing that there are three things which contributed to my successful transition to adulthood:

- Relationships
- Financial resources
- Programs that engage lived experience

I believe all foster youth need these three things in order to be successful and there are three primary ways to accomplish this:

- Prioritize relationships and family placement for transition age youth in foster care. We need relationships and supportive adults who will last far beyond our time in foster care.
- Invest in financial resources that meet the various needs of young people while we pursue higher education, the workforce and find our footing as young adults.
- Ensure all young people in foster care have access to a network of peers and supportive adults. This can be through a youth advisory board, peer navigation positions who can help us find the right resources, or campus support programs. This is critical to reduce the isolation of being in foster care, and empowering us to improve the foster care system for those who are still experiencing it.

Thank you for having me today. It is truly an honor and a blessing to be here. Five minutes is not enough time to give you the full scope of the foster care system and what children and youth experience, so I urge you to meet with lived experience youth in your home state and hear their stories and see who they are.

I want you to have the understanding that our stories are more than just testimonies and sad news articles you see, but that we are people with dreams and ambitions. We are people who break the cycles of poverty and dysfunction. We are people that have achieved many successes and received accolades; with the barriers we faced, it doesn't always make sense for us to be here. Yet, I sit here today to say that we are people who will make success the expectation and not the anomaly. Thank you again.

Chairman LAHOOD. Mr. Otero, thank you for sharing your personal story and for your passionate leadership and advocacy. So we are grateful.

And to all our witnesses, thanks for your testimony.

We will now proceed to the question and answer session with the members that are here today, and I will begin by recognizing myself.

Mr. Lloyd, I will begin with my first question for you. You provided a policy recommendation that Congress should look to re-imagine child welfare financing to incentivize delivery of effective services. And I appreciate your, I guess, big picture view that you outlined.

As has been mentioned, this subcommittee is working on reauthorizing Title IV-B, which we found is an important flexible funding stream for States, but it is also outdated and duplicative in some places.

I am curious your opinion on what we can do to make sure Title IV-B is modernized so it works better for our youth and particularly foster youth.

Mr. LLOYD. Thank you, Chairman. Yes, and I think there are things that we will echo probably from September when you heard about the opportunities to streamline and make Title IV-B more outcome-based and efficient.

We would also suggest the reinvestment and a redirecting of Federal and State Title IV-E savings from reductions and use of foster care and group home placements into Title IV-B placements. So there is this relationship between Title IV-E and Title IV-B as incentivizing greater performance from both titles by making appropriate investments in IV-B.

Federal increasing to Title IV-B programs that are tied to the performance, ensuring that a rate of expenditure under Title IV-E preventions. So, as States have this new opportunity under the Family First Act to spend under Title IV-E preventions, so far, 6 years in, we have about a 1 percent of total Federal spending in that IV-E prevention program. So could we incentivize more IV-E prevention through increasing Title IV-B investment and kind of coupling those things together.

There is opportunity to modernize and align both IV-B and IV-E to also allow a broader continuum of prevention investments, and it sort of relates to the illustration from Nebraska that there are times when Title IV-E prevention services can't be used for certain families. They are not eligible because their children are not quite on the verge of entering foster care.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you. I appreciate that, Mr. Lloyd.

Mr. Kiefer, I am now going to turn to you.

In your testimony, you underscore a lack of communication and knowledge about the rights and opportunities and the need to create creative—and be creative about engaging with youth so they are receptive and see the value in these programs.

With your extensive experience guiding teens to be successful in adulthood, I can imagine the underutilization of certain programs is not unexpected. In your opinion, what steps should be taken to ensure that children in foster care are informed about the tools and resources available to them?

Mr. KIEFER. Thank you, Chairman LaHood. This system is more complex than even I can wrap my mind around, but if I were to boil it down to one thing, based on the experiences that Bench Mark has and the individuals that we serve, it is the connection to a singular mentor for a long, long period of time. And we have managed that by creating programs that kids step through so they don't have to be transitioned to another organization.

But I think that that underlying message holds true here. We can work on the system itself, which to me seems to be a largely static thing, or we can invest in very dynamic individuals who serve as navigators, who they themselves understand exactly how to work through things so that kids get what they need. And to me that sounds like certainly an area of focus for us on individuals.

Chairman LAHOOD. And just to follow up on that, in terms of the practicality of how we implement that, what do you think are some of the attributes of Bench Mark's that make you stay engaged?

Mr. KIEFER. We generally hire a younger demographic. We hire young people who are a little bit older than the teens that we serve so that they feel a quick connection to them. And we have extensive training so that they understand the systems that they are involved in. And then we pay them, you know, a very reasonable salary to do this work so that they are not looking for a job elsewhere, that they feel they can make a career out of committing long-term to serving the individuals that we pair them up with.

These are also known as credible messengers. So oftentimes the people we hire have grown up in the community where those individuals grew up. So they have an immediate connection and understand things that maybe I wouldn't understand as someone who comes from another community.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you for that.

Mr. Otero, in your testimony, you shared that the youth advisory board showed you the difference that sharing your experiences could make. Can you provide an example of a policy the advisory board asked you to provide feedback on and how it impacted the State child welfare system in Indiana?

Mr. OTERO. Oh, that is taking me back a few years. Well, I don't know other than the Driving Act is probably the most recent one I can really speak of, was being able to just talk to everybody and share an experience about how—the difference between cost of insurance for just a regular 19-year-old on their own plan compared to a 19-year-old on an adult's plan and just the cost variation.

I mean, it is three times as much for just any 19-year-old to be on their own plan, and depending on other factors, it could be even higher. So I was able to just really share that impact that that can have on someone's financial status.

So other than that, I really worked with the board to just talk to other foster—like foster parents. I did foster parents training when I was on IYAB, and I got to really talk to those foster parents and tell them what my great foster parents did for me and how you can communicate with us in different ways and things like that. So—

Chairman LAHOOD. And what we found is not every State, obviously, has youth advisory boards similar to what you talked about in terms of your own experience.

Would you be an advocate for States implementing a youth advisory board?

Mr. OTERO. Absolutely. I think not only does it provide you with the peer support. I have met all of my—a lot of my friends are from that board, and we have continued to do other coordinating programs all throughout the country together to this day.

And so not only did it grow great peer relationships, but it keeps those relationships in State, in your own county. You are able to then start programs or start—get things running off the floor.

And then, I mean, the people who run Foster Success, they provide you with opportunities now from the age of 14 all the way to—I am 24 now, so I have been—I could, theoretically, if I started now, would be—you know, 14 to 24, that is a 10-year span of having one individual entity involved in your life that is so consistent. And I think it is pivotal for these kids to succeed. So I really love what our agency does in Indiana.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you for that.

I will now recognize Mr. Davis for 5 minutes.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And let me thank each one of you for your moving testimonies. And if I don't get to all of my questions, just know I will be calling you.

Ms. Behr, you mentioned how critical help is with getting one's driver's license and how much independence it gives to a person. Can you talk a little bit more about how that really zeros in on what a young person needs?

Ms. BEHR. Yes, thank you. So, in the State of Florida, we have a program called Keys to Independence that was helped to be created by Florida Youth SHINE, which is a youth-led, peer-driven organization, that they ended up creating this amazing program that works with young people aging out of the foster care system gain their driver's license, car insurances, and more.

When I turned 16, this program wasn't put into place yet. And when I was aging out, there was a small pilot program in Orlando, so I still didn't qualify for it. And then, by the time that I was turning 21, I no longer met the requirements.

So regardless of this going statewide, I was ready to drive the moment I entered into foster care. I had had my driver's permit from the second that I could take that test, but I was hit with multiple barriers: unable to get my birth certificate or Social Security card and was met with barriers because I didn't have an attorney fighting for me.

And by the time—the way that these licenses would have helped me is because I had to meet ratio in order to go to swim practice, to go to school, to ensure that I had a staff member that could take me anywhere. I missed out on activities. I missed out on debate tournaments. I missed out on being able to be—just have normalcy. And I often missed school because I was waiting on a bus that often didn't show up.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you very much.

Mr. Otero, you mentioned some experiences with driving. Do you have anything you would like to add to that?

Mr. OTERO. Yes. So many of my peers struggle to find adults willing to help with the driving hours or the insurance, which has been mentioned.

DCS, the Department of Child Services in Indiana, only pays for six of those hours needed, but now with this Insuring Foster Youth Trust Fund, it has been able to help pay for those remaining hours.

But the reality of it is that a lot of the foster parents, A, when this whole thing happened, when my foster parents decided to help me with driving, they didn't even know if they actually could. So that was a barrier itself is, what can our foster parents do? And, if they can do it, I think a lot of them would. And if they were able to talk about how impactful this could be, that they may be able to take that on themselves.

So I just think the communication barrier is why it is there.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you very much.

Mr. Kiefer, you and I seem to share a common passion in terms of work with individuals who have had some difficulty with our justice system. How do you reconcile and work with those individuals to be most helpful?

Mr. KIEFER. Thank you, Mr. Davis. It is a belief that we at our organization share, that our efforts should be focused on the disproportionately small part of our population that does a disproportionately large amount of damage to our communities. If we focus our resources there, we can have great outcomes that spread across the community.

And the last thing that those young people need is another program that they need to jump hoops through. They need someone to say, all right, I am in your life now. I will take it from here. You keep doing what you are doing. Do the right things. I will navigate the system. We will get you to your desired outcome. That is what keeps us so motivated to work with that population.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you very much.

And, Mr. Lloyd, I know that I am about out of time, but I am very familiar with Casey and the work that you have done for years and years and years.

What would you say to us that we can do to really help young people aging out?

Mr. LLOYD. That is a great question. I think really leveraging this fantastic opportunity under Title IV-B and the reauthorization to make young people a priority. Currently, Title IV-B, you are not able to actually provide services to youth over the age of 18. And so there are opportunities to both, like I mentioned in my testimony, to prevent things and promote things. And so it is kind of a combination of IV-E and IV-B investment together.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you all.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you.

Pursuant to committee practice, we will now move two to one. I will recognize Dr. Wenstrup of Ohio.

Mr. WENSTRUP. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being here today.

I think it is important that we learn from the past, modernize our welfare system as best we can. And so I thank all the witnesses here today for discussing your angles of this experience along the way.

You know, you think about drop-in centers and, you know, we have one in Cincinnati, and a lot of places have it. And what you always come away with from the adults that are in there is where were you when I was young. And I think that that is the key, and I know that you are all over that.

To think that there are nearly 19,000 youth that age out of foster care each year without a strong connection to a family, a mentor, or other adults, that really is something we have got to address. I can tell you, at 18 years old, I was not ready to be without my parents and to be completely independent, and that is just a huge component of a successful life beyond. So the permanency of these types of thing I think is really important.

You know, one example of modernizing services over time is an example of Boys Town. Maybe you are familiar with Boys Town in Omaha, Nebraska. It started about 100 years ago, mostly comprised of orphans and runaways, runaways from reformatories. And Boys Town is still out there in Omaha today. It is their own city. They have their own fire department, police department.

But one of the things that they have done besides being so helpful to that population for many, many years, in 2008, they directed some of their focus, additional focus serving children while they remained at home with their families. So reaching out beyond just come here because you have no one else, right. So some people have families and they reached out, and they found it to be cost-effective.

You talked about success, outcomes-based. They can say that by 2013, 92 percent of children who received services from Boys Town were children living in their own homes. That is a component we address too.

At home, I have been involved for 30-some years with boys help, girls help. Where parents say we don't have the best environment for our child, they go live in this home. They are not taken from their families, but they live there. They are mentored. They are safe. They are secure. They get tuition to go to, generally, private schools. It is basically a scholarship. The outcomes have been tremendous.

You know, so those are things—we realize what is necessary for success, and I think that that is what we need to keep focusing on, and that is good support while you are in it and good support when you reach age 18, or allow provisions. Like, I think you were on insurance when you were with them, and those are great examples.

So, Mr. Kiefer, based on your extensive experience with the foster youth, do you think there is a necessity for redesigning, modernizing our Federal programs catering to youth? I mean, I hear good things like the youth advisory board. Basically, what it sounds like you are doing is see one, do one, teach one. You know, come back and help the next person along the way to provide a consistent, reliable, trusted family atmosphere.

And so what do you recommend we might be able to do here to make that more feasible?



Mr. KIEFER. Thank you, Dr. Wenstrup. I would encourage this committee to truthfully think simplistically about this. We understand what the gold standard is. You just described it in action at Boys Town. It is the connection to a singular or small group of long-term mentors who will be there for years.

I am not sure why we can't build that into our systems. It may be much more cost effective than working on tweaking a system as a whole. Again, I believe the system can generally be a static thing, but an individual who navigates the system on someone's behalf is dynamic and can change with the times. And we can teach them new things, and they can adapt to new systems.

Boy, I wish that kind of job would have been available to me when I got out of college, to be a navigator for kids.

Mr. WENSTRUP. Well, and you mentioned too, understanding the tools available.

Mr. KIEFER. Yes.

Mr. WENSTRUP. Because it is not one size fits all necessarily, but that singular mentor I think is huge. So thank you.

I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Dr. Wenstrup.

I recognize Mr. Carey of Ohio now.

Mr. CAREY. I want to thank the chairman. I also want to thank the ranking member for having this hearing.

And I also want to thank all of you, the witnesses, for testifying here today. Your willingness to share your stories of how foster care system has impacted you is truly inspiring.

And I will tell you, Ms. Behr, you may have missed a lot of debates, but I will tell you what, nobody could be prouder of themselves in the job you did today. I really appreciate your testimony.

Now, I have a 22-year-old son. I have a 4-year-old son and a 22-year-old son, big discrepancy in age. But, you know, my son is about ready to graduate from college. And, you know, he has a full-time job, works at our State house in Columbus.

But I will tell you it is not always easy to navigate that transition from being a youth in school and then going into your career no matter—regardless of your circumstances. And I understand that foster youth face unique challenges when transitioning out of the foster care.

And, Mr. Kiefer, I really appreciated you giving us the four bullet points that you wanted us to take away. And I think the one that really resonated with me was the long-term mentor because—Mr. Otero, I am glad you speak to your foster father every Friday. If I could get that from my 22-year-old, I would be very, very happy.

Mr. Lloyd, listen, the challenges of youth, you know, accessing available services appears two-fold, involving foster youth not always being aware of those services, and the States underutilizing programs, like the Chafee Program in Title IV-B.

What do you believe contributes to States not fully taking advantage of these programs to serve our youth that are in foster care?

Mr. LLOYD. Thank you, Representative, for the question.

Yeah, I think, like you in your question had mentioned, the lack of awareness. And I think that is something we hear time and again from young people. So I think a good starting point there

would be just expecting States and encouraging courts to make sure young people are informed of what is available in their States.

There are funding constraints as well with these services. The Chafee Program that was mentioned earlier is 25 years old, and the funding initially came to States in the mid-eighties. It was doubled in 1999, but it hasn't had an increase since then.

But the eligibility for Chafee has grown significantly. Under the Family First Act there was a rule recognition that all young people ages 14 and older in foster care should be receiving these services to promote their well-being as well as to promote connections to caring adults to that individual to a permanent relationship. So there is that kind of diluting effect of the program right now because we have had that big increase of eligibility but no real increase in funding.

I would say also the lack of alignment between the services and what young people recognize as the highest needs that they have. And so it is just another good example of why we need youth advisory boards in the design of these services.

Mr. CAREY. Thank you for that.

Mr. Kiefer, does your program Bench Mark utilize any metrics or outcome measurements to gauge the success in supporting foster youth on their journey to independence?

Mr. KIEFER. Yes. And the metric that I think matters most to this discussion is the amount of time that we track that a student and their mentor have at least one face-to-face interaction per month, and that is 38 months on average. So over 3 years on average that our individuals are connecting with their mentor.

We have done that organically. We built a program to make that possible, but there is no reason that other communities couldn't do that exact same thing or that we as a committee can't build our systems to drive that kind of long-term interaction.

Now, we certainly have other metrics, that, you know, 92 percent of the kids who have offended when they are in the program don't re-offend. You know, 77 percent of the kids who come into the program with truancy issues start going back to school once they are in the program.

And we have a whole list of these that is in my written testimony, but the point is those things are not because the kids sat through a 6-month mentoring program where we talked about life skills. It is that they had a mentor to say, all right, now the lesson is done. Are you going to go to school tomorrow? Do you need me to pick you up from your house? Because if that is what it takes, that is what I will do. And that is the key.

Mr. CAREY. Listen, again, I want to thank all of you for making the trek here. I mean, it was difficult for me to come in from Columbus this morning, and I know how hard it is. But your testimony, your written testimony, our staffs read it, we read it. And we appreciate you taking the time.

So, with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Carey.

I recognize Ms. Chu of California now.

Ms. CHU. Well, I want to thank all of the witnesses for your very important testimony, and especially the foster youth for sharing

your stories of how you came to be the successful young adults that you are today.

Your testimony supports something that I am very proud to announce, which is the introduction of a bill that Representative Erin Houchin and I are introducing, which is the Increasing Access to Foster Care to 21 Act.

This bill would provide a financial incentive for States to extend foster care beyond age 18, building on years of research that shows that extending support into the first few years of adulthood can make a clear, positive difference in the lives of young people.

In fact, 28 States, the District of Columbia, and nine Tribes have already extended Title IV–E foster care for youth beyond age 18. But not all States have opted to extend this support, which means that too many fostered youths lose supportive services as soon as they turn 18.

The Increasing Access to Foster Care to 21 Act would ensure that States receive Federal reimbursement for all youth in their care up to age 21.

Mr. Chair, last Congress, nearly 100 child welfare organizations on both the State and Federal level endorsed my legislation to extend foster care nationally, and I would like to submit this letter of support from them for the record.

Chairman LAHOOD. Without objection.

[The information follows:]

July 29, 2022

Representative Judy Chu  
United States House of Representatives  
2423 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Chu,

As national, state, and local organizations invested in the success and well-being of transition aged youth, we are writing to express our support for the *Access to Foster Care to 21 Act*. This legislation builds on the advances in supports and service provision made by states that currently extend foster care beyond age 18 and will ensure that **all young people in foster care have the option to remain in care until age 21**, regardless of where they live.

As you know, society has changed since Congress first directed federal foster care to age 18 in 1980 – traditional paths to adulthood no longer include finding a full-time job shortly after high school and retaining that job for years, building stability and security. Immediate marriage, enrollment, or being drafted into the military have changed as well, happening less commonly than in the past. Even education has changed, with fewer students completing two- and four-year degrees on time. With rising costs of living and fewer opportunities available, many young adults choose to live at home and rely on the support of their families well past high school as they seek education, employment, and stable housing; why do we expect their peers in foster care to become fully independent on their eighteenth birthday? We must ensure that young people in foster care have access to similar supports as they transition to adulthood and independence.

Federal data tells us that compared to youth that “age out” of care at age 18, youth who remain in care have better outcomes across multiple measures. Youth who remain in care have higher rates of employment, housing, school attendance and graduation, and health coverage. They also have lower rates of incarceration, drug treatment referrals, and giving birth or fathering a child. This important legislation would give all young people the option to remain in care, allowing them the opportunity to achieve such improved outcomes.

The *Access to Foster Care to 21 Act* allows states the flexibility to design tailored programs to meet the needs of the young people they serve. States that currently extend care do so in a variety of ways, including family foster care placements, independent living arrangements, or institutional settings including college dorms, group homes, maternity homes, Job Corps and other employment training settings, and voluntary substance abuse treatment facilities. States will have the freedom to decide how best to meet the needs of this population.

Thank you for your commitment to children and youth in foster care. We applaud you for addressing this gap and working to ensure that all young people have access to the support they need to successfully gain independence.

Sincerely,

**National Organizations**

Boys Town  
 Cayuga Centers  
 Center for the Study of Social Policy  
 Child Welfare League of America  
 Children's Advocacy Institute  
 Children's Home Society of America  
 Children's Rights  
 Coalition on Human Needs  
 Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U. S. Provinces  
 Congressional Research Institute for Social Work Policy (CRISP)  
 CSH  
 Council for Opportunity in Education  
 Family Centered Treatment Foundation  
 First Focus Campaign for Children  
 First Place for Youth  
 First Star  
 Foster America  
 Foster Care to Success  
 Foster Club  
 Futures Without Violence  
 Hispanic Federation  
 Human Rights for Kids  
 Justice Resource Institute (JRI)  
 iFoster  
 K.E.L.L.Y. Youth Services  
 Mental Health America  
 National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd  
 National Association of Counsel for Children  
 National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)  
 National Employment Law Project  
 National Indian Child Welfare Association  
 National Network for Youth, Inc.  
 National Foster Youth Institute  
 NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice  
 Parents As Teachers  
 Pressley Ridge  
 SchoolHouse Connection  
 SDM Consulting, LLC  
 Sevida  
 Sojourners  
 The Family Focused Treatment Association

Voice for Adoption  
 Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights  
 Youth Law Center  
 Youth Villages

**Arizona**

Children's Action Alliance  
 Onward Hope, Inc.

**California**

African American Wellness Center for Children & Families  
 All Saints Church Foster Care Project  
 Allies for Every Child  
 Children's Law Center of California  
 My Tribe Housing  
 Seneca Family of Agencies  
 Sycamores

**Connecticut**

Community Health Resources  
 Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families

**District of Columbia**

DC Child & Family Services Agency

**Florida**

Brevard Family Partnership  
 Florida's Children First  
 Selfless Love Foundation

**Georgia**

CHRIS 180, Inc.

**Indiana**

Foster Success  
 Marion County Commission on Youth (MCCOY)

**Kentucky**

Voices of the Commonwealth

**Massachusetts**

Children's League of Massachusetts  
 Hopewell  
 Old Colony Y  
 Roxbury Youth Works, Inc.

**Michigan**

Michigan's Children

**Minnesota**

Family Alternatives

**Missouri**

FosterAdopt Connect

Missouri Alliance for Children and Families

Missouri Coalition for Children

**New Jersey**

Care Plus NJ

embrella, Embracing & Empowering Families

**New Mexico**

Child Haven

**New York**

Children's Aid

Citizen's Committee for Children of New York

Fostering Youth Success Alliance

**North Carolina**

Youth Villages

**Ohio**

ACTION Ohio

OHIO YAB

**Oregon**

Oregon CASA Network

Our Children Oregon

Youth Progress Association

**Pennsylvania**

Youth Support Partner Unit

**Rhode Island**

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

**Tennessee**

Youth Villages

**Virginia**

People Places, Inc.

Voices for Virginia's Children

**Washington**

Partners for Our Children, Seattle  
Seneca Family of Agencies



Ms. CHU. Mr. Lloyd, we know that extending vital services to older foster youth can have a long-lasting positive impact on their lives. However, in your testimony, you reference the barriers that face youth who want to continue those services.

I know that there was one study that showed that extended foster care benefits are such that youth have to qualify first, and they have to qualify with such things as enrollment in college or vocational program, employed at least 80 hours a month, or have a medically noted exemption, which can be, indeed, a barrier.

So, can you explain more about these barriers and what positive impact would reducing these barriers have on youth transitioning into adulthood?

Mr. LLOYD. Thank you, Representative Chu, for the question.

Yeah. Of all the young people who are eligible to extending care past age 18, less than a quarter will be still remaining in care by age 19. So, even though more than around 30 States have taken up Title IV-E reimbursement, there is still not enough utilization of this program. Yet the outcomes are very clear that it is helpful to them.

And so, yes, I think there are definite barriers. I think sometimes there might be barriers related to awareness of some of the opportunity to extend, the design of the services themselves.

But there is also some financial kind of challenges as well. The eligibility to be reimbursed in the State if the young person actually works to meet that criteria, their income might be such that they are no longer Title IV-E eligible, which then helps—inhibits the State from actually affording that cost of extended care. So there are definitely some challenges with the eligibility that could be improved.

Ms. CHU. Mr. Otero and Ms. Behr, thank you for being with us and testifying about your experiences. And, well, Mr. Otero, you have experience with Indiana's extended foster care program. Can both of you expand on how choosing to be in a program that can extend services beyond 18 helps advance foster youth's success in life?

Mr. OTERO. Without it, I would not be here today. I would never have been able to pass college. I made a lot of mistakes my freshman year, as a lot of college kids do. I partied way too hard. And I was failing a lot of classes, but I was able to receive tutoring and mentoring services.

I was then able to then have access to the education and training voucher. There is a process that handles that, but without that, I wouldn't have been able to pay for the summer classes to help me get caught up due to those intense mistakes.

I had to, every summer until I graduated, take those summer classes, but without that money, I wouldn't have been able to pay for that.

So just that extended service kept me—not only did it keep them involved in my life, and I had someone to help keep me accountable, but it just helped me with getting to that point where I needed to.

Ms. CHU. Ms. Behr?

Ms. BEHR. Really quickly. Although I didn't know that it was an option to leave foster care when I turned 18 so I didn't turn to ex-

tended area, it helped keep me in one place and not have to move until I went off to college that summer, and so it made sure I had a roof over my head and food for me as well and had a couple of supports and kept me with my mentor.

Ms. CHU. Thank you.

And I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Ms. Chu.

I now recognize Mr. Moore of Utah.

Mr. MOORE of Utah. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you for hosting us.

Thanks for being here. Mr. Otero, don't beat yourself up too much over that freshman year. It catches a lot of folks.

I recently—you know, there is—I feel very fortunate to be on this committee and this subcommittee. Very seldom in life does something kind of stick with you for more than a few years on a particular issue or something you were working on. Since I was, like, 17 years old—completely different situation from what you two have dealt with—I have been able to be close to this issue by engaging with organizations that support this in various ways and in various levels of intensity, sometimes very close in doing a lot of work in particular or being a little bit more distant, but it has been something that has been constant to me. It is an emotional issue.

I had a group of teens in my office the other day, and I remember telling them, "Don't let this define you." As they were introducing themselves, they oftentimes define themselves as this. You are just a freshman in college when it all comes down to it. You have got your own path. And you are an inspiration to so much of us that are trying to build the right policy so we can do this.

The data on this is staggeringly dangerous. If we don't help—if we don't figure out how to help foster children find more permanency, find that forever home, that forever family, the outcomes are so scary. They are not just small percentages of people that get involved in drugs and homelessness and legal issues and death. This is a huge number. And so thank you for staying close to this. Thanks for helping this issue and in helping us figure out how to go about doing it.

To put a little context on this, Mr. Otero, just share with us briefly—from your testimony, you were separated from your seven siblings. Is that correct?

Mr. OTERO. Yes.

Mr. MOORE of Utah. And just kind of tell me how those separations impacted your transition into adulthood.

Mr. OTERO. So, with the separation of me and my siblings, I didn't—I took it as—I didn't want to mention it today during the speech because it did mean—it meant a lot to me to have the relationship with them, but I—we all took different paths in life.

I am one of eight children from between my mother and my father who have been able to not only graduate high school, I was the first one to graduate on time between me and my siblings and my immediate family, but I am the only one to go to college and graduate with a bachelor's degree.

And so I am blessed to be where I am today, but seeing what my siblings went through, I was able to navigate the system when I went into the system at an older age. They had all experienced ter-

rible things between—they were much older than me when they went in the system.

So they all experienced terrible things. I saw what it was when they ran away from the system, and they didn't—they stayed on the run until they turned 18. Three out of four of them did. Only one of them aged out, but immediately that sibling did not want to do anything to—or have having to do with DCS after they turned 18, even though they knew that they were—had services accessible to them, they just couldn't deal with the stigma of how DCS was attached to them.

So I have witnessed firsthand the negative things that come from that, and I am just blessed to be here today.

Mr. MOORE of Utah. And many of the things that you highlighted follow the trends and outcomes that we see with transition age foster youth.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to submit for the record the Annie E. Casey Foundation on Fostering Youth Transitions 2023 report. Chairman LAHOOD. Without objection.

[The information follows:]



## FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS 2023

STATE AND NATIONAL DATA TO DRIVE FOSTER CARE ADVOCACY

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Annie E. Casey Foundation thanks the staff of Child Trends — a nonprofit research organization focused on improving the lives and prospects of children, youth and their families — for their analytical and editorial support.

#### ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

## INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is always a time of great change. For young people who have experienced the trauma of being removed from their families and entering foster care, states become responsible for providing the support and learning opportunities that help teenagers and young adults keep pace with their peers and grow into productive, healthy adults.

In more than two decades of working with child welfare leaders, policymakers and young people across the country, the Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® has been guided by research that shows young people in foster care need permanent and meaningful relationships with supportive adults, reliable resources to meet basic needs and accessible opportunities for education and work.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 20 years, data reported by states show important gains toward these ends: Use of group placements is down; placement of young people with relatives and close friends has increased; and the overall population of young people entering foster care has fallen. Slightly more youth with foster care experience are employed at age 21, and fewer become parents by that age.

But the data also show that child welfare systems must do more to meet the needs of many young people in their custody who need help navigating the journey to adulthood. Nationally, systems fail to find permanent families for more than half of older youth in foster care. Many young people in foster care lose connections with their birth families and are unable to access safe and stable housing, connect to postsecondary education and training and join the workforce. Although federally funded independent living services are available, fewer than half of eligible youth receive them.

"Neglect" has become the most frequently cited reason for removing teens from their home — a designation that is on the rise, often closely related to poverty and a signal that with the right support and resources, a family might be able to stay together. Too many young people continue to be placed in institutional group settings that hinder their connections to caring adults who can support their healthy development.

### Data used in this report

The experiences and outcomes of young people ages 14 to 21 vary widely by state, the level of government that typically implements foster care services. Along with variations in demographics, data reflect choices states have made about investments in youth well-being and child welfare policies and practices, illuminating areas of successful innovation as well as major obstacles. *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023* state and national profiles use the following data sources:

- The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) collects information on children who have spent at least one day in foster care during the federal fiscal year. AFCARS administrative data are collected and reported by the states. These data include information on how many children are in foster care, their demographic characteristics, why they enter, where they are placed and when and why they exit. For this analysis, the foster care files used are from fiscal years 2006, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020 and 2021.
- The National Youth in Transitions Database (NYTD) Services File collects information on children in foster care who have received independent living services under the federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program). NYTD Services administrative data are collected and reported by the states. States report annually on all youth who receive at least one federally funded independent living service, such as career preparation, tuition aid or financial literacy training. The files used are from fiscal years 2016, 2018 and 2021.
- The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Outcomes File collects information on young adult outcomes — for example, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, employment, pregnancy and incarceration. The NYTD Outcomes File receives data from a cohort study: States survey young people who are 17 years old and in foster care during the baseline year and conduct follow-up surveys at ages 19 and 21. A new cohort starts every three years. The files used are for the group that reached age 21 in 2015, the group that reached age 21 in 2018 and the group that reached age 21 in 2021.

See *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: Source Notes* for more information about data used in the state profiles. *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: Data Tables*, also provided, contain data disaggregated by race for each state.

These negative trends have persisted, even as fewer young people across the nation are entering foster care. That means leaders have an enormous opportunity to use their resources more effectively and with greater focus to design a support system that will get better results for the teenagers and young adults who depend on it to get a good start in life.

*Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: State and National Data to Drive Foster Care Advocacy* is a unique compilation of data designed to inform federal and state policy efforts aimed at making a difference for young people in foster care. This overview brief and detailed profiles of the latest available data from all 50 states, along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, expand on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's first *Fostering Youth Transitions* brief, published in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The expanded data report for 2023 offers state data profiles that trace the experiences of young people ages 14 to 21 who were in foster care between 2006 and 2021. These publications can help advocates, policymakers and practitioners raise national awareness of the unmet needs of young people who experience foster care and spur data-driven systems and policy change to help youth succeed in adulthood.

## WHAT THE NATIONAL DATA SHOW: AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD ON PROGRESS TO DO BETTER

*Fostering Youth Transitions 2023* national data show that despite some gains, systems still are not connecting enough young people to relationships, resources and opportunities — the critical building blocks for successful adulthood. Advocates and policymakers should use the state profiles to compare their state's performance with these national trends.

### There are fewer teenagers and young adults in foster care.

The number of youth in foster care has declined steadily since 2006 — a drop accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in fewer reports of abuse and neglect and fewer child welfare placements. More than 271,000 young people ages 14 to 21 were in foster care in 2006 (a rate of 8 per 1,000 teens in the general population); by 2021, that number had dropped to 147,143 (a rate of 4 per 1,000). Young people in this age group made up 34% of the total foster care population in 2006 and only 24% in 2021, AFCARS data show.

Fluctuations in the foster care population varied across racial and ethnic groups. For example, the national decline in the number of Black young people in foster care since 2006 outpaced the overall decline for youth ages 14 to 21. Even with this decrease, Black youth and families continue to be overrepresented in foster care. Latino teenagers and young adults did not decline as much, while their overall representation in foster care rose, as did the number and percentage of young people identifying as mixed race.

More research is needed to understand what is driving the drop in the foster care population, what preventive services may be most effective in accelerating it and how different groups are affected. But this reduced population offers an opportunity for government agencies to focus on fundamentally redesigning systems, which have historically focused on younger children, to better meet the needs of older youth.<sup>3</sup>

### Cases classified as “neglect” — often related to poverty — are on the rise.

Reasons for entering foster care shed light on the types of services and support families need to prevent removal of their children or to quickly reunify. Cases reported as neglect increased from 29% of total cases in 2006 to 48% in 2021.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, caseworkers identified fewer young people as entering care due to child behavior problems: 49% in 2006 compared with 30% in 2021.

Advocates, researchers and young people and families with foster care experience have been sounding the alarm about the complex relationship between poverty and neglect, including how poverty and neglect can be conflated in child welfare policy and practice. Because neglect is the most frequent reason young people enter foster care, state and federal leaders must examine the role of underlying issues of poverty in these cases and focus on strengthening families and communities to reduce the need for child removals.

### Group care placements are declining as kin care increases.

Research shows that young people develop best when they live in families.<sup>5</sup> Since 2006, placements in group settings have decreased by 13% across the country — but 1 in 4 teenagers and young adults in foster care still lived in a group setting in 2021. Although group placements have declined, kinship care placements with relatives and close friends have increased from 14% in 2006 to 22% in 2021. Use of group placements varies by racial and ethnic groups: A recent study found Black children were more likely to be placed in a group care setting than their Latino and white peers.<sup>6</sup>

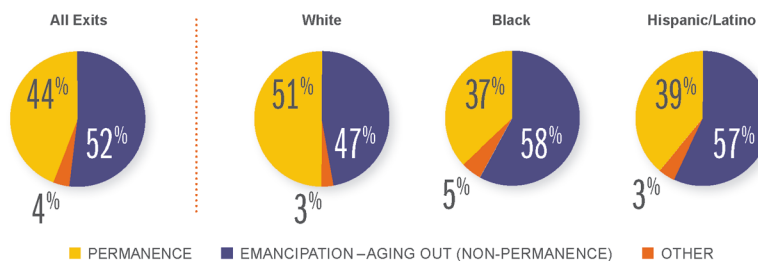
Young people living in institutions are less likely to have strong relationships with supportive adults and access to typical adolescent activities,<sup>7</sup> while young people placed with kin experience stronger relationships with caring adults and better outcomes as they approach adulthood, including housing stability.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, state and federal child welfare policy prioritizes placement with kin over placement in non-relative foster care to keep young people connected to their communities and cultural identities and to the supportive adults in their lives.

### Systems are finding permanent families for fewer young people.

Child welfare systems are responsible for helping young people achieve permanence, which is associated with better young adult outcomes, including housing stability, higher educational attainment and employment.<sup>9</sup> Even though the overall number of young people in foster care has declined, teenagers and young adults ages 16 to 21 are less likely to leave foster care with permanent families in 2021 than they were in 2016. Fewer than half leave foster care to live with adoptive families or guardians or return to their birth families.

#### PERMANENCE VS. EMANCIPATION (AGING OUT) IN THE UNITED STATES, 2021

Foster care exit reason, by race



Permanence includes adoption, reunification with birth families, living with a relative and guardianship. The above charts represent young people ages 16+ who exited foster care in federal fiscal year 2021. Due to rounding, some charts may not equal 100 percent.

SOURCE: Child Trends' analysis of data from 2021 AFCARS



### Although extended foster care options have increased, participation is low.

At the time of this report, 33 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and nine tribes provided federally reimbursable extended foster care, which allows young people to continue to receive placement and support services until age 21. Many other states offer their own plans or related services to help young people in foster care beyond age 18. Research shows extended foster care can improve educational attainment, employment and housing for participating young people, especially young people of color.<sup>10</sup>

Although increasingly available, extended foster care is an underutilized resource. Nationally, only about 22% of those in care on their 18th birthday remained in care on their 19th birthday in 2021 — a slight decrease from 2016, despite state and national moratoriums on aging out during the pandemic. These data show the need for state leaders to collaborate with young people to raise awareness and design effective, community-based, extended care services and programs that youth find useful.

As more becomes known about young people's experiences during the pandemic and about the rate at which they reentered care after age 18 or stayed in care to age 21, data on the use of extended foster care may change. However, due to variations in state reporting practices, it is unlikely that data for this population of young people will be captured in AFCARS.

## YOUNG PEOPLE NEED RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT FOSTER SUCCESS

In 2018, *Fostering Youth Transitions* raised awareness about the low percentages of older youth in foster care receiving necessary services to prepare for living on their own. Data collected in subsequent years can help states and advocates identify emerging trends and shift priorities, policies and practices to produce better outcomes for older youth. The updated data reveal gaps in service delivery, persistently low outcomes on important measures and opportunities to build a brighter future for teenagers and young adults in foster care.

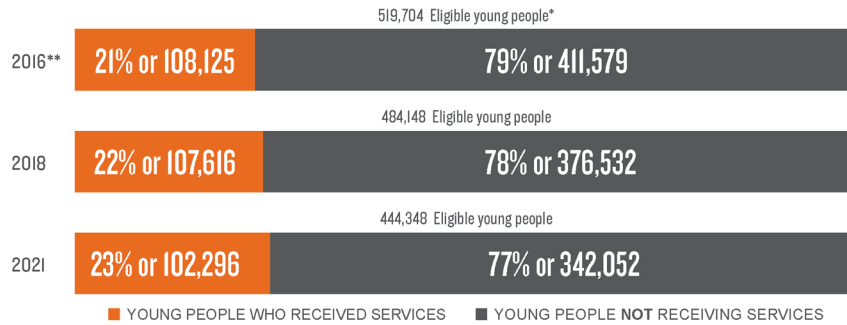
### Federally funded services to help youth transition from foster care are underused.

Federal law requires states to ensure all young people who have been in foster care have safe and stable housing, access to school or employment and resources to support their reproductive health and parenting needs.

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood provides dedicated federal funding and guidance to states to help young people transition successfully to adulthood, while maintaining a focus on family connections and permanency planning. The Chafee program can provide financial assistance for basic needs such as housing and completion of high school, college or vocational training. It also includes mentoring programs, financial education, life skills training and programs providing information about tenants' rights, meal planning and nutrition. In addition to prioritizing prevention of entry into foster care, the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act recognized the importance of these vital services by lowering the age at which young people can receive Chafee services to 14, raising the upper age to 23 and allowing states to provide education and training vouchers to young adults up to age 26, among other improvements.<sup>11</sup> The 2018 act did not, however, provide any additional funding for states to serve the expanded eligible population.

For youth in foster care — and especially for those exiting foster care without connections to a permanent family — these resources can make the difference between surviving and thriving, between instability and stability. But less than a quarter (23%) of eligible youth were served by their child welfare systems in 2021, and just under half (47%) were ever served across all the years they were eligible for the programming between ages 14 and 21.

## TRANSITION SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE



\*The number of eligible young people in each year is calculated using multiple years of AFCARS data. For example, for 2016 estimates, AFCARS data from 2008-2016 is used to capture the number of young people who were 14-21 years old during these years or the total number of young people eligible between the ages of 14-21 at any point while in foster care.

\*\*The percent and number of young people receiving services each year is calculated using NYTD services data. For example, for 2016 estimates, young people who received at least one Chafee-related service in 2016 are counted.

SOURCE: Child Trends' analysis of data from AFCARS and NYTD

Furthermore, of those who received at least one service, the proportion receiving each of the major services has steadily decreased since 2016. During the pandemic, many Chafee service providers closed or struggled to deliver their services virtually. However, data show that the decline in service delivery preceded the pandemic and has continued its downward trend since at least 2016.

More than 880,000 young people ages 14 to 26 were temporarily eligible for expanded Chafee services enacted by Congress as part of pandemic relief.<sup>12</sup> Of those young people, however, 85% were no longer in foster care, which made it difficult for states to reach many of those eligible. While several states faced challenges in providing services, others were able to provide additional cash assistance directly to young people, as well as other support — for example, supplements to educational training vouchers and increases in independent living services.

### Systems are falling short at providing services needed to improve youth outcomes.

Understanding the outcomes of young adults who have been in foster care is critical to shaping the services and support they need. Although national data show some conditions for 21-year-olds with foster care experience improving slightly from 2016 to 2021, young people who have been in foster care continue to be far less likely than their peers in the general population to be enrolled in education or training after high school, stably housed or employed — and are more likely to become parents or experience incarceration.

Among 21-year-olds with foster care experience in 2021:

- 79% had earned a high school diploma or GED credential, NYTD data show. This compares to 92% of their peers in the general population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey<sup>13</sup> estimates;
- 24% had been enrolled in postsecondary education or training, compared to 50% of 21-year-olds in the general population; and
- 55% were employed full time or part time, while 64% of their peers in the general population had jobs.

## USING *FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS 2023* STATE DATA PROFILES TO MAKE CHANGE

The data analyzed in *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023* point to the urgent need to ensure young people emerging from foster care have the full benefit of the relationships, resources and opportunities that will enable them not only to thrive, but also to contribute to their communities and a strong future for all of us. Each profile highlights a state's key demographic data about young people in foster care that can be used to help pinpoint disparities across racial and ethnic lines and compare outcomes over time. The profiles also show whether and how young people are accessing available resources, which can help leaders determine whether changes are needed to ensure greater awareness of and accessibility to resources such as extended foster care.

By reviewing the data and including young people who have foster care experience when designing solutions, advocates, policymakers and practitioners can take action to make improvements. Through the [Jim Casey Initiative](#) and [Journey to Success](#), a policy advocacy campaign that seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for youth and young adults with foster care experience, young people have been identifying resources they need and what works to help them achieve their aspirations.

In partnership with young people in their state, readers should digest the data and ask the questions below to spark conversations about how young people in foster care are faring and what more can be done to help ensure lifelong well-being and success.

**RELATIONSHIPS:** How well is your state doing at ensuring young people are connected to permanent families before they leave foster care? Can more be done to ensure their connections to mentors and other supportive, caring adults? As the reported reasons for entry to foster care shift, how well are systems responding with solutions addressing the level of need?

**RESOURCES:** Are workforce shortages hampering the ability of agencies to help eligible young people? What more can be done to prevent homelessness among young people emerging from foster care without a family? Which communities have designed replicable solutions with their young leaders to deliver support to those who most need it and where and when they need it?

**OPPORTUNITIES:** How well is your state doing at ensuring young people have access to education, employment and other opportunities to learn and grow during a key developmental phase in their lives? Are the young people most in need of extended foster care disconnected from or distrustful of agencies' ability to help them gain access to services designed for them? Are the available transition services programs keeping up with technology and the needs of today's young people?

## CONCLUSION

While in recent years the Chafee program and the Family First Prevention Services Act have made positive changes to promote kinship care and align foster care policy with healthy adolescent and young adult development, the data show that our government systems must do better. And the solutions are within our grasp. Practitioners and policymakers must work on two fronts: support families to prevent older youth from entering foster care; and redesign systems to meet the needs of youth and young adults in foster care today, enabling them to become thriving adults tomorrow. As the number of young people entering foster care declines, policymakers, practitioners and advocates must seize the opportunity to engage these youth; understand what is, and is not, working in states; and make strategic investments in the future.

## ENDNOTES

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Mr. MOORE of Utah. This report highlights a trend of child welfare systems failing to find permanent families, forever families for young people. Yet we know that children who have these forever families to support them have better young adult outcomes, including housing stability, educational attainments, and other things, and employment that I discussed.

And I just appreciate you for your testimony.

Mr. Lloyd, similar to previous questions, but could you just add a little bit more context on evidence of generational cycles where children who were once in foster care, particularly those in child welfare setup, end up involved in the system again when they have their own children and how can we address this cycle proactively from a prevention forward perspective?

Mr. LLOYD. Right. Thank you for the question.

Yes, young parents need more options to receive support and from trusted sources for sure. And 26 percent of young people, older youth who exit foster care will be parents by age 21. And so I think, again, it relates back to the Nebraska example of how we need to be supporting young parents and the young parents or expecting parents in foster care.

I would also just like to say in relationship to your mention of permanency that the testimony that I had shared really talks about kinship foster care, and we really need to stay the course in prioritizing family for young people and particularly connecting them to their relatives and other members of their kin as placement settings.

There has been a number of things that Congress has championed over the last 15 years with supporting kinship guardianship assistance, navigation programs, family finding and search requirements to identify relatives, and the data is paying off. It was a 40 percent increase. There has been no increase in foster—in nonrelative foster care for youth over the last 15 years. That total increase in permanency and placement setting has been because of kinship.

Mr. MOORE of Utah. Thank you. Thank you all.

Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Moore.

I recognize Mrs. Steel of California.

Mrs. STEEL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This is a very important issue that I served at Family and Children Services at the county and L.A. County and Orange County levels. So I know how these foster kids when they get out of the foster care system, and L.A. mostly, a lot of kids become joining gangs or, you know, a lot of actually kids become homeless people there.

So we really have to work together in a bipartisan way to supporting young adults who transition out of the system at critical times in their development because that is a very, very sensitive age, and they think they know everything, but at the same time they don't know anything. So that is the way it is.

And all of the witnesses, thank you for coming. And this is a very important issue, and this is the one actually that, you know, we can make our youth grow and we are going to make a bright future for this country or not. So I am very much concerned about that.

But it is really interesting to hear from Mr. Otero that, you know, coming up today, I really appreciate it, sharing your perspective and journey with all of us. And, you know, I really praise you that you graduated from college, and out of all of those siblings you really got out of it and you did really well.

I just want to say what specific challenges do youth in foster care encounter when seeking to obtain a driver's license? And were there notable roadblocks that deferred from those faced by your peers on the top of your State has the foster Youth Trust Fund that helps. In southern California, we don't walk more than one block.

We all need cars. And these kids get out of the foster care, they really need a car to drive anywhere in southern California. So love to hear a little bit more about that system, how they really help and how, you know, they can work with those kids.

Mr. OTERO. So, in Indiana, the people who are going to be navigating the program for the Insuring Foster Youth Trust Fund, they do a really good job of connecting with the youth at a young age and to help eliminate some of the barriers.

My job as a home-based case worker, I work with foster youth. I try to inform all the foster parents and the biological parents when they get the kids because it is going to be—eventually if kids get unified, they have to then handle that. Right?

But it is learning what can you do as a foster parent, can you sign a right to say, Hey, I take legal responsibility for this kid? Sometimes they say it is the FCM, family case manager's responsibility because you are a ward of the State, they are supposed to have responsibility of you. So sometimes it gets in a little gray area there.

But in Indiana, we have also waived the driver's license fee for youth searching for their driver's license. So that—it is a small cost, but it is a cost that is nonetheless paid for. And there are still problems with that. I mean, the BMV, depending where you go, doesn't even know that that is a thing. So they have to ask another higher up, and it goes through chain of command that loses communication the whole way through.

So the number one thing that I think that can help is getting people like myself, people who have experienced the system, people who have helped testify on these things, to advocate throughout the State and just inform them. I mean, we know that DCS meets and that we can go to those conferences, and we can then tell them that these are the things that are going on that everyone should know and that the family case managers, the collaborative care case managers should know.

Mrs. STEEL. Thank you for that.

And there seems to be a great deal of misinformation when it comes to foster youth accessing the services, even questioning if they were real. What were some of the misconceptions around accessing services? And what do you think is contributing to the misinformation and how can we solve that?

Mr. OTERO. Yeah. So a lot of times people are, like, I didn't know about this. I didn't know that foster youth can get almost free college by the Indiana 21st Century Scholar. I didn't know that the education and training voucher was a thing. What attributes

to a lot of it is that there is a high turnover rate in our case managers in Indiana—well, everywhere actually, high turnover rates.

And whether that be attributed to the stress of the case and that you are dealing with real people with real problems, that is a real thing, but if we can just get people in positions to communicate these things effectively. And when you go through foster care—and there are many different people in a foster youth's life. There is the LCPA, the licensed foster care agencies.

At times, there is my job, the home-based caseworkers, the FCMs. Then you have the judges. Having someone to get them all together to inform them of what is going on is the best way to get that communication right.

Mrs. STEEL. Thank you.

I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mrs. Steel.

I now recognize Mr. Evans of Pennsylvania.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Lloyd, you highlight the importance of mentoring as one of your policy recommendations in your testimony, which we know is important. How can we better incorporate peer mentoring partners when implementing the policy that we are discussing today?

Mr. LLOYD. Thank you, Representative Evans, for the question.

Yes, I think it is in some ways about encouraging States to prioritize things, like peer mentoring and other mentoring services. Title IV-B would be an opportunity to designate young people as a priority population for services like that. And it is also an opportunity I think to revisit the Chafee program, because funds currently exist for mentoring, but in the report you see that few youth are actually receiving those types of services.

Mr. EVANS. If I piggyback a little bit on Mr.—

Mr. KIEFER. Kiefer.

Mr. EVANS [continuing]. Kiefer. When Mr. Kiefer said what he said about long-term commitment, the question really is how do you get people to understand that this is important if they don't seem to understand. Now, you would agree they sometimes don't seem to understand.

Mr. LLOYD. Right.

Mr. EVANS. Mr. Kiefer said very emphatically. I am just trying—not that you have a magic wand. I am just trying to understand, right?

Mr. LLOYD. Absolutely. And I think that what we see is stability in placements, changing placements too many times, or stability of the caseworker, too many social workers involved, the likelihood that they will achieve lifelong permanent connection goes down.

So we really need stability of relationships, and I think it is to your point about the mentoring. So I think it is helping mentors and mentor programs understand that there needs to be that long-term connection. It also relates to the real core objective of child welfare when you come into foster care to promote permanency for them.

The best way to do that is connecting them back to relatives. Extended relatives and kinship members of their family are the most likely individuals to be in it with them for the long haul.

Mr. EVANS. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Evans.

Now turn to Mr. Smucker of Pennsylvania.

Mr. SMUCKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to each of the witnesses for being here today. Particularly Mr. Otero and Ms. Behr, thanks for sharing your story. Appreciate that.

Mr. Kiefer, great job today, and you have been asked a lot of questions about what has made your program successful. You have talked about the long-term care mentoring. One of the other things I have noticed is that you are nimble in terms of creating new programs to meet the needs of the kids who come through the program, and I was going to ask you just a little bit about that.

You also mentioned you have Kenny, your son, here with us today, and you said he is available to ask any questions. So with your permission, I was going to ask you about the program, but I know that Kenny has been through Bench Mark and many different programs. I would love to hear from him.

What was that experience like for you? Tell us about—

Mr. JACKSON-KIEFER. Come up here?

Mr. SMUCKER. Sure, do that. We will kick Will out for a minute, and you can tell us about, you know, how you experienced Bench Mark in your life.

Mr. JACKSON-KIEFER. As mentioned earlier, I was first at Bench Mark when I was 14, so I was glad I went there when I was 14 because Will became my mentor. I left for a little while in 2016. I came back on probation. And during that time, as mentioned, I lost my father, my mother, and my brother, and then Will offered to take me in because I had nowhere else to go.

And, ever since then—you know, he, of course, adopted me and became my father, and I have just appreciated it so much because, you know, the common theme here has been support and guidance, and that is what all foster children need is support and guidance as parents are supposed to offer.

And Bench Mark has offered that for me countless times. And I have given everything back to Bench Mark. Every time I step in there, I—I mean, every break I come back from school, my first thing I do is work at Bench Mark, help the kids. I stay in contact with the kids.

I help—you know, they are in a similar situation that I am, and we just keep, you know, that Ping-Pong conversation back and forth all the time. And I just love Bench Mark, and I support it. And I will, you know, always support Bench Mark, donate my money to Bench Mark, and also start something just like Bench Mark to help children just like me.

But there was something that I was thinking about. Earlier we were talking a lot about, like, parents and stuff and how—you know, like, I think that is the main—a part of the problem. We should, you know, try to encounter—like, deal with it because, you know, it comes from your parents, and our parents' burdens come onto us, just like making it a policy. You know, moving forward something we could do is, you know, get parents' help with knowing how to take care of children and, you know, support them and move forward because, you know, that is really where it all starts is our parents.



But Bench Mark has helped with many kids, and I see it every day. I am so grateful to be able to go back and have—I mean, of course, Will is my father now. But it makes me a bit emotional knowing that, you know, this is how far we have come. And I am very proud of him and everything he has done there.

And thank you.

Mr. SMUCKER. Well, thanks for sharing, Kenny. I very much appreciate it.

Mr. JACKSON-KIEFER. Sure.

Mr. SMUCKER. Thank you so much. Wonderful story.

Mr. Kiefer, any additional things you would like to say about Bench Mark and the programs? I know you have a number of different programs as I have mentioned. Any other particular things you would like to highlight?

Mr. KIEFER. Thanks, Congressman Smucker.

The only other thing I will add is that we generally throw programs to kids knowing that they are wonderful resources for them. But if those programs don't connect to each other, I think we are doing a disservice to the kids who are in them because we are setting them up for these short-term engagements that are very positive but then systematically don't offer a long-term.

So, again, from the minute that a kid is housed in our local Lancaster County Intervention Center for a delinquency issue or a dependency issue, they can get a Bench Mark mentor. And we will just begin by showing up at court, seeing them weekly in the detention center, and walking them the whole way through—if it is delinquency, the whole way through their time on probation, if it is dependency—

Mr. SMUCKER. I know you are also focused on jobs now, and maybe that is a new focus for you or you are increasing your focus on that. Tell us a little bit about what you are finding, support from the community, what is working, what is not with that.

Mr. KIEFER. We found interestingly, as Mr. Evans brought up, that pure mentorship, offering a job to a young person who succeeded in our program to serve as a peer mentor is wonderful to give back, but also builds their resume in a huge way. And then, if we bring community members in who work in businesses in the community, they see these individuals. They get to know them.

They look at their resume and say, Geez, you have worked at Bench Mark for 2 years. I would love to talk to you about working here at my business.

I mean, we have seen that to be a very effective step by step through our program, through working our program, to getting a job elsewhere.

Mr. SMUCKER. Well, thanks again for being here. Our community is very fortunate to have you there. Appreciate your work. Thank you.

Mr. KIEFER. Thank you.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Smucker.

I now recognize Mr. Smith of Nebraska, who is a former chair of this subcommittee and passionate about this issue area.

Mr. SMITH of Nebraska. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to my colleagues as well and certainly thank you to our panel. Your professional perspective—more importantly I would say your per-

sonal perspective being vested in this issue, all of you, it is very compelling.

And there is one thing that I have noticed. It doesn't take a lot to observe this, but the repeated reference to human interaction and the value that that has that, you know, I fear that over time we have tried to help people, I think well intended. We have tried to help people by qualifying them for various services, sitting them in front of a computer, hit a few buttons. Okay.

You qualify for X. And yet the more important dynamic is that interaction with a human being, whether it is a caseworker, whether it is a mentor, whether it is an employer, certainly a family member when possible. And I also know that it is hard to get folks to step forward.

I was just wondering if you could perhaps elaborate on what we should be mindful of or just what you want to remind us of that is important in terms of engaging these folks who can bring so much in terms of mentorship and that human interaction that is so effective ultimately.

How can we generate more available caseworkers and other mentors as well? Maybe if we can, maybe a little bit from all four of you.

Mr. Lloyd.

Mr. LLOYD. Okay. Thank you for the question.

Yes, I think there is a real opportunity in this current package with Title IV-B to reauthorize this, to stabilize the workforce. They are—it is a system that is balancing so many competing priorities, and we really want to see that consistency of the caseworker being connected.

I would also just say too that the permanency efforts for young people, identifying kinship families and other foster families, recruiting them and supporting them well and even financially incentivizing States, of positioning States well through cost sharing to support families is critical.

We did some national polling at one point, and it was nearly 30 percent of adults in the U.S. that consider becoming a foster parent. If even 1 percent of adults in this country moved forward with that, we wouldn't have a problem with foster care and adoption.

Mr. SMITH of Nebraska. Thank you.

Ms. Behr.

Ms. BEHR. Thank you.

So when it comes to these issues and especially with mentoring, creating programs or finding ideas for it, I feel like it is always very important to gain authenticity's voice from all areas, including working with Tribes or even with other youth—diverse youth, recognizing that mentorship is a two-way street, so working with the young people as well to recognize it is a—it is a working relationship.

A lot of young people when we get a mentor, we feel that that is somebody we can call when we are upset. But we don't recognize, like, that we could also help contribute to them as well. And something that my mentor told me was that she expected that out of me, and that helped me recognize how to build a relationship because a lot of us didn't know how to build those relationships.

And then also having connections, something in common, we had to figure out—I had to fill out a sheet of paper, and my mentor did too, to get connected. So matching kids with random mentors doesn't always help, so recognizing that as well.

And then, lastly, I always like to say more male mentors because we find that a lot of females do volunteer to be mentors, and there is a lack of young men or men in general that volunteer. Because I had a mentor my entire time, and I have had her for 10 years, and my brother, he had a mentor who just disappeared, and they just didn't show back up.

Mr. SMITH of Nebraska. Thank you.

Mr. KIEFER. Thank you, Mr. Smith.

Speaking from my own experience, my wife, Karla, and I never planned to foster and then adopt Kenny, but we had a window into his life through our program so that when these things happened in his life that made this opportunity available to us, it was a no-brainer, but it was not a foreign thing to us.

The concept of doing it was not in our plans, but knowing him was the key. We knew right away that we would be happy to do it and be with him for as long as it took. But it was because we knew him ahead of time and we had gotten to know him through a community-based program.

Mr. SMITH of Nebraska. So a familiarity?

Mr. KIEFER. Correct.

Mr. SMITH of Nebraska. Very good. Thank you.

Mr. Otero.

Mr. OTERO. One thing that I can tell you that would benefit mentoring is if we got the youth who have been through this to use their college degrees or go into college to then give back to the system, like myself personally I am a home-based caseworker, and I see that I can relate to these kids on a level where they are understanding that I have been through that.

I can tell you the programs because I have done them, and here's the real-life benefit of it. This is the exact money, and it could increase here, so incentivizing—there is a program that is being piloted by a couple of agencies in Indiana, Peer Mentoring, of former foster youth who are now working with current older foster youth that are aging out of care.

And I think that is an amazing thing because getting someone who has been through the system to help someone else navigate that system is an amazing thing. And so I would incentivize more States to do that.

Mr. SMITH of Nebraska. Thank you.

Thank you to our all-star panel here today. I really appreciate it.

I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Smith.

I recognize Ms. Sewell of Alabama now.

Ms. SEWELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member, and all of our guests who are here today.

You know, one of the things that Kenny said that really resonated with me is that the common thing when you are talking about helping youth—foster youth is support and guidance, support and guidance.

I wanted to make sure that all of my colleagues knew that there is a foster caucus, a congressional foster caucus, and they put on every year a Foster Youth Shadow Day.

And one of the things that I think that we can do, aside from making better policy and passing a reauthorization of Title IV, is to be involved, to actually accept one of the foster youth that day to shadow you.

I did it, and I have to tell you I was completely ignorant as to what was going on in my State about foster youth until my classmate, Karen Bass, Congresswoman from California, now the mayor of L.A., started this shadow day.

And I can't tell you how rewarding it is to meet someone from my State who is experiencing something that I don't know anything about. And I have been educated by those wonderful youth.

And I just want to say to all of you, it is hearings like this, first-hand accounts like you, Ms. Behr, and you, Mr. Otero, that really give us an eye into what is going on, but we can't do it alone. It is not just about money. It is also about making sure that we have good public/private partnerships that are there as a safety net.

And so my first question is to you, Mr. Lloyd. I know that you represent a foundation that has taken one of its missions working on this, but can you speak to other public/private partnerships that exist?

Mr. LLOYD. Yeah. One example of that is currently called the Opportunity Passport. It is a matched savings account. We have helped 20 States develop this, and they have leveraged \$85 million in support of the initiative's programming. Thirty-five of that is from private investment of probably about 80 foundations, including ours.

We invest about a million dollars in that. We match young people dollar for dollar for certain asset purchases as they transition from care. The number one asset purchase is a car, right, which is no surprise.

Ms. SEWELL. Exactly. I actually wanted to ask Ms. Behr if she could—because I notice that you have a connection with the National Foster Youth Institute. And I know that Congresswoman Bass, now Mayor Bass, was really influential in starting that initiative.

Can you talk a little bit about why that was so important? And can you tell me what do you see as the difference between yourself and other foster youth that don't go to college, that don't get out of high school? If you could sort of say what the difference was, that would be really helpful, or at least talk about your own experience.

Ms. BEHR. Yes. Thank you.

So the first thing is about the shadow day being so important. Although I didn't get to shadow the person that was from my State, I got to learn a little bit about South Carolina, and I got to meet with Senate—or Representative Nancy Mace.

Ms. SEWELL. Yep.

Ms. BEHR. And got to learn a little bit about what is going on over there, got to educate them, and then honestly got to learn a little bit about what goes on everyday here—

Ms. SEWELL. In Congress, yes.

Ms. BEHR [continuing]. As well as get a little trip. I got to go and see the top of the roof.

Ms. SEWELL. Oh, you got to do that.

Ms. BEHR. I did. It was really cool.

Ms. SEWELL. Good for Nancy for doing that.

Ms. BEHR. Yeah, it was awesome. But it really gave me the recognition that it is really important what is happening up here, and I would love to be up here every day advocating for change. So I am working on making my way up here.

Ms. SEWELL. Yes.

Ms. BEHR. But that was really thanks to NFYI or National Foster Youth Institute in helping us get into that.

And then when it comes to the difference of foster youth, I feel that one of the biggest things—reasons that I am sitting here today was because when I entered the foster care system, I knew that I wasn't supposed to be in the foster care system and my family needed minimal services. I was 16, and I could speak for myself, but my voice was stripped in the courtroom.

I wasn't allowed to talk in there. And so I essentially made it my—once—my judge at one point told me that I would be a failure in life if I didn't go home to my mom, which I didn't know was an option at all. I made it my mission to show my judge that I am going to be a successful young adult, to the point that I was a homeowner at 21. I had bought my own car. I have my own—started a side business. I bake a lot. But not everyone has that opportunity to recognize what they can do when they are older.

Ms. SEWELL. Yep.

Ms. BEHR. And they don't have those supports there. I mentioned my mentor earlier. I had my dad that stuck it out by my side. He was fighting to get us home and constantly just fighting for us tooth and nail, and not every child has that. And I try to be that support for those young people in the State of Florida and try to help them get to where they believe would bring them the most success.

Ms. SEWELL. Well, thank you all.

And, Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to acknowledge what a great hearing this has been and, once again, to encourage all of the members on our subcommittee to participate in the Foster Youth Shadow Day. It really is—I think I got more out of it than my mentee, but it was really, really rewarding, but also very, very informative.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Congresswoman Sewell, and appreciate you reminding us of the caucus.

We will now turn to Ms. Tenney of New York.

Ms. TENNEY. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, and thank you Representative Sewell. I did not know about that. Sounds like a tremendous day, and I would certainly join the caucus and would love to be part of the day.

Ms. SEWELL. And the chair is Gwen Moore.

Ms. TENNEY. Oh, great. Well, that is terrific, even better.

Ms. SEWELL. And they are cochairs, Gwen Moore and Don Bacon.

Ms. TENNEY. Wonderful.

Well, thank you so much to all of you. What a wonderful experience. Not every day in Congress is bad, especially when you get to

meet people like you where you are so inspiring and have really faced struggles and challenges, and this is an important program.

And I just thought I would share a few facts just about my home State. I am from New York, and enabling people to transfer out of foster care is really important, and we have over 25,000 children in foster care, and only 3,000 are moving out of care at this point. So, as you cited, Mr. Lloyd, we need to find foster parents. We need to find mentors. We need people who will do this.

I was lucky enough to be the daughter of a Supreme Court Justice. My dad was 35 years serving, but his little known story is he was a very poor kid from New Jersey that kind of works his way through life. And he was always very concerned about fostering people who didn't have a mentor and someone who didn't have a person to look up to, and he always instilled that in us. In our family business, we do provide opportunities for people who have been in foster care. We provide opportunities for people who have, you know, a lot of other obstacles to getting gainful employment. So almost universally anyone that comes out of foster care becomes a tremendous asset to our company. And so I appreciate all that you are doing and getting these kids to this point.

But I wanted to just ask a question first to you, Mr. Lloyd. And what can we do in the system—how do we make this system—is there something we can do to overhaul the Child Welfare Services Program by reducing the fragmentation and by redesigning it—when you talk about reimagine, redesign, can we bring and streamline this system to include this so that we do have—you know, meet the goals of the consistency, the consistency of care, the long-term goal of having one mentor or one system where someone can turn to. Could you just, like, maybe briefly touch on that for a minute?

Mr. LLOYD. Absolutely. First, I would just like to congratulate Congress for really setting a vision time and time again for the child welfare system to be recalibrated. And I do think that there is a need to do some major redesign of child welfare. Child welfare, unfortunately, has become a catch-all, a social service catch-all, right, when there is a lack of housing in the community or substance abuse disorders or many other things, they look to child welfare as sort of the lowest common denominator in the community. And so we really need to help the child welfare system focus on families who are really truly in crisis and who need that kind of intervention, a much narrower set, and find other ways to kind of work collaboratively and across funding streams to strengthen families and communities and provide that stabilization.

Ms. TENNEY. Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

Now I wanted to just also ask because I have a dear friend who is actually a businessman in my community who grew up in foster care. He was raised at the House of Good Shepherd and then went into foster care in Upstate New York. And he is now a very successful businessperson. And he tells this story—and I have had him testify for me in Albany and other places—on his journey out of foster care and into success. And I asked him just now—I texted him a little while ago—who were your mentors and who was the most influential to you?

You know what he said? There were so many people that impacted my life. But he did say that one of the things that we could do is allow more flexibility in the program so that we could have access to more mentors. And I thought that was—that was his idea. He also provides foster care students or young people to come to his business.

So how do you incorporate that? And I love the idea with the business community, bringing them into play. How do we do that? Is that something we can do under the child welfare system? Is that possible?

Mr. LLOYD. Yeah. Thank you for the question.

Yeah, there are definitely situations where mentors, and I would even say kinship care parents, grandparents, relatives are actually not eligible to take in children because of certain licensing requirements. They are unable to be licensed as a foster parent.

The administration recently set out a new regulation giving States the option to have kin-specific licensing centers so more grandparents and relatives can become foster parents. When they are not foster parents, they get less than half of a foster care per diem rate, and that is only if they are eligible to get a TANF child only payment.

Ms. TENNEY. Okay.

Mr. LLOYD. If they have two to three children, it can be three times being a licensed foster parent versus what they would get through TANF.

Ms. TENNEY. I know my time is expired. Just one quick thing on what Representative Sewell has mentioned about Foster Care Shadowing Day. Maybe we should each bring some business that would be willing to offer opportunities for a foster care person and meet them, and that would help get them connected. Because that is what it is all about, isn't it?

Mr. LLOYD. Yes.

Ms. TENNEY. About having connections and taking advantage of those things as you move through life.

But I just want to say thank you to all of you. You are very inspiring, and it was really great to hear from you. And hopefully we will make some great changes and good services to the taxpayers as we move forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Ms. Tenney.

Our last member who will question today is Mr. Feenstra of Iowa. He doesn't serve on the subcommittee, but he wanted to be here today because of his interest and passion for this area.

I recognize Mr. Randy Feenstra of Iowa.

Mr. FEENSTRA. Thank you so much, Chairman.

This is very important to me. I just came off the floor. Member Kildee and I had a bill that we are moving forward and that will be voted on by the Members of Congress concerning foster care data. We feel that there is so much going on in so many different States, but we really don't have the data to create solutions to the problems that exist.

And I just want to give all of you a shout out for your testimonies. I read them. Unfortunately, I was on the floor so I couldn't

hear them verbally. I apologize for that. But I read them, and they are moving. They touched me.

In Iowa, the great concern and why I am so passionate about this is that we have lost almost half of our foster care parents in the last 4 years. There is a problem. We see that in D.C. We see that in many other States. And so we have got to come to a solution on what is happening.

You know, I also see that 19,000 youths age out of the foster care program. And are they ready for success? You know, that is a concern. All the sudden you age out, and you are on the street, or you could be. That is scary. What are we doing to make sure that we are preparing them for success?

I know there is an enormous amount of good people in the world and in our Nation, and they strive to improve our foster care system and support those within. Obviously, we have many of those here. But I would like to talk about two key aspects, the kinship foster placement and nonprofit organizations.

Mr. Lloyd, you discussed the Casey Foundation report and the positive trend and the shifts toward kinship placements. But what struck me is what you just said is that when you start going down extended relatives, that they all of a sudden have a disadvantage financially, and this could have dramatic effects when there is this financial vulnerability.

So I would like you to just talk a little bit more about that, what you are seeing and the vulnerability that we are putting when we have a child that goes into these placements that the money is not there to help financially.

Mr. LLOYD. Thank you for the question.

Yes, earlier today there was a mention of just the stigma associated with child welfare. And some relatives are, frankly, fearful of working with the child welfare agency, and so they will sometimes take in children, you know, into their home and don't want to necessarily have any relationship with the child welfare agency, don't want to become a licensed foster parent because they fear they could lose their grandchild, right. So there is a lot of concern around needing to prioritize kinship caregivers, support them better, encouraging States to do that and so just better positioning them, because we think that that is really the key. Some States are searching for relatives to the fifth degree of consanguinity and affinity. I don't know how many of us even know our relatives that far out. That is great-great-great-grandparents.

Mr. FEENSTRA. Yep, yep. Wow.

Mr. LLOYD. Okay.

Mr. FEENSTRA. Wow.

Mr. LLOYD. And so that is what it is going to take if we want to have families to step up for children, and we need to support those families when they come. And if it makes sense for them to be a licensed foster parent, we need to do that.

Mr. FEENSTRA. Yep.

Mr. LLOYD. And we need to support them well. There are States that are not financially supporting kin who are licensed at the same rate that they are supporting foster parents who are not relatives.

Mr. FEENSTRA. It is ridiculous.



Mr. LLOYD. It makes no sense.

Mr. FEENSTRA. It doesn't. It doesn't. And we have got to solve this. There is a solution to be had right there.

Thank you for those comments.

Mr. Otero, thank you for your testimony. I applaud what you wrote. You were placed, obviously, with your grandmother that we were just talking about. What are the most significant challenges that you saw with your grandmother through the foster parent? And I am, again, looking for solutions. How can we improve? What would you tell me? You know, Member Feenstra, this is what needs to be happening. What do you think?

Mr. OTERO. So what I think is that I do love the idea of kinship, and I love that I was placed with my grandmother. My grandmother was the best thing that ever happened to me in my life. However, I want to keep in mind that we cannot lower the standards of these homes because they are kin.

I have seen it firsthand not being—my grandma loved me, and she loved me more than anything, and she would sacrifice her sleeping on the floor so we could sleep on the couch because we didn't have a bed, you know. And the reality of it is if you can make it look good for one DCS day when they come to see that house, then you look good one day. And then they say, "Okay, we are done with you. You can have these two kids."

And my mom and dad ended up having two more kids that lived with my grandmother. So we had four older ones in foster care, four of us living at my grandmother's sleeping on the floor, sleeping on couches. And the fact of the matter is that, if we just gained any little bit of financial support, we would have been able to move out of—we lived in Gary, Indiana, which I am sure you know all about Gary, Indiana. You have heard of it at least once.

And so, you know, in that circumstance, we can't lower the standard. But if we can provide the financial support, then these homes—I mean, they can support them better. If you wouldn't let your own child stay in these homes, why would you keep these kids here, you know? And I see that every day.

I see DCS allow kids to stay in these homes that are infested with bugs or have no paneling because it is kinship, and they pass an inspection for one day. But then when I enter the home and I see that, I say they wouldn't let their own kid—they wouldn't sleep there themselves. Why shouldn't those kids.

Mr. FEENSTRA. Great, great comments. Thank you. And it is our responsibility to do something about it. And thank you for coming.

I yield back.

Chairman LAHOOD. Thank you, Mr. Feenstra.

That concludes the questions and our answers today at this subcommittee hearing.

Let me just say to our witnesses how grateful we are for you being here today and how much you have contributed to this dialogue and discussion. And in particular, Rebekka and Jordan and also Kenny, you give us hope. You inspire us by being here today and sharing your stories. And, Mr. Lloyd and Mr. Kiefer, thanks for your expertise, your experiences, what you brought to us here today and for sharing everything you have today.

We can't do this work without you and without people in the field sharing with us how we can do things better from a public policy standpoint.

And, as we look at our work ahead in a bipartisan way, we look forward to continuing to stay engaged with you, getting your thoughts, and making sure we are doing everything possible to change the trajectory on those statistics I gave earlier and what we need to do better because we have plenty of work to do moving forward.

So I will just remind members that you have 2 weeks to submit written questions to be answered later in writing. Those questions and your answers will be made part of the formal hearing record.

With that, our hearing is concluded. Thank you. Safe travels.

[Whereupon, at 3:56 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

**MEMBER QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD**

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February 15, 2024

Todd Lloyd, MSW  
Senior Policy Associate  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
701 St. Paul Street  
Baltimore, MD 21201

The Honorable W. Gregory Steube  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Ways and Means  
Washington, D.C. 20515-0917

In response to questions from Work and Welfare Subcommittee Hearing:  
*Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*

Dear Representative Steube,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to questions you submitted to the Ways and Means Work and Welfare Subcommittee. Please find our responses to your questions below.

**Given the critical shortage of foster homes, especially for older youth, what solutions do you believe should be explored to support these individuals?**

The reauthorization of Title IV-B, currently under consideration, is a tremendous opportunity for Congress to increase investment in services and supports that stabilize families and prevent the need for foster care. However, there are circumstances when children must enter foster care, and improving the ways we recruit and support foster families is critical to ensuring children are temporarily cared for in the least restrictive and most family-like way possible.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of U.S. adults willing to consider becoming a foster parent. Routine [national polling](#) of attitudes toward foster parenting has shown increasing knowledge and consideration of foster parenting among U.S. adults. In fact, the percent of U.S. adults who have or are considering becoming a foster parent increased from 28% to 38% over the last five years (between 2017 and 2022). These data suggest many individuals are open to the possibility of becoming a foster parent. The fact that too few follow through points to barriers that should be mitigated through appropriate investment and changes in public policy.

Congress has spurred significant increases in the use of kinship foster care over the last 15 years resulting in a 10% increase in kinship placements (AFCARS data). Kinship foster care is

when family relatives or close family friends (such as godparents) are made aware of a loved one entering foster care, and then become licensed as foster parents to provide temporary care for the child or youth. A few states now have as many as half of their children in foster care residing with kin; over 40 percent of children in foster care in Florida are placed with relatives. States are showing significant progress in maximizing federal opportunities, most of which were spurred by Congress, to increase the number of foster families through the recruitment of kin as foster parents. However, more opportunity remains to maximize the potential of kinship caregivers serving as foster parents. For instance, some states do not financially support kinship caregivers comparably to other foster parents, which obviously puts kin caregivers at a disadvantage. Also, foster parent licensing standards can sometimes pose barriers to kin becoming foster parents.

We know from research that children and youth are best cared for in families. Family-based care, especially with kin, helps ensure important connections are maintained with siblings, school, culture, and faith communities. We also know family-based care is more likely to support permanency goals, which is most often returning children to their parents. Family-based care is also the most cost effective.

Congress should stay the course under the Family First Act by ensuring federal investment is committed to placement settings that produce the best results. This includes funding for Quality Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) that are equipped to provide time-limited, clinically necessary and family involved therapeutic support. My testimony outlined several recommendations for targeted policy actions we believe would further strengthen family-based foster care for youth and improve the likelihood that they leave foster care and achieve lifelong family.

**Outside of a single foster parent, are you aware of any other model of foster care that provides a home-like setting?**

The model of kinship foster care helps children remain connected to their extended families, siblings, communities, schools, etc. It is an approach that promotes connections well beyond the immediate kinship caregivers. Other models of foster care that provide family-like care include Therapeutic Foster Care and the Quality Parenting Initiative.

Also, recent research – from an [AAP/Chapin Hall study](#) – points to the need to better support the quality of the workforce, enhance and make more accessible community mental health services, and provide quality after care as key areas of need that could help support parents and other caregivers to forestall the use of out-of-home care and provide the support that new caregivers need to commit to fostering and kinship care.

**Additionally, do you see models like Cottage Homes as potential solutions in providing support for foster youth?**

We understand that cottage homes can differ from state to state in terms of their model and how they operate. We also respect that each state utilizes its flexibility to create a continuum of services for children, youth and families. With regard to federal funding for foster care placements for children under age 18, we support targeting federal funds to the most family-like settings, which include kin and non-kin foster families. We also support the quality standards associated with Q RTPs which help ensure that non-family-like settings are utilized in instances when short-term, clinically necessary and family involved therapeutic treatments are needed.

**The proposed "Create Accountable Respectful Environments (CARE) for Children Act" suggests placing foster children in cottage family homes and making them eligible for foster care maintenance payments. How do you think this approach could contribute to resolving the shortage of appropriate foster homes, supporting the preservation of sibling groups, and ensuring a system of checks and balances for a child's ongoing safety and well-being?**

The shortage of foster homes should be addressed by a specific and targeted plan to retain existing foster and kinship caregivers, recruit more who can provide quality care, and provide a reliable, robust, and easy to access package of support that will enable individuals to commit to providing foster and kinship care.

To this end, the House-passed H.R. 3058, Recruiting Families Using Data Act, which would update the guidance to states regarding recruitment, training and retention of foster and adoptive families. In addition, we support policy proposals that provide kin and non-kin foster families with services that help them with their family caregiving, such as kinship navigator programs, and increased mental health access for youth and families, including kinship caregivers.

In reviewing Florida [data](#) on how sibling groups are placed in foster care, we found that the state is largely placing sibling groups in family settings, and increasingly so. Prior to Florida's implementation of the Family First Prevention and Services Act, (on September 30, 2019) Florida had 124 sibling groups residing in group homes. Of those, 77 were in sibling groups of two, 32 were in sibling groups of three and only 15 were in sibling groups of four or more. At the same time, there were 3,430 sibling groups who were placed with families (foster parents, relative or non-relatives), including 381 sibling groups of four or more.

The overall number of children in out of home care in Florida has decreased from 23,537 in September 2019 to 18,549 in December 2023. The number of sibling groups in out of home care has likewise decreased from 5,760 to 2,593. As of September 30, 2023, there were 50 sibling groups in group homes – 43 were groups of two and only one was a group of 4 or more.

In contrast, there are currently 2,599 sibling groups placed together with families – 286 of which are sibling groups of four or more.

**As soon as kids in the foster system turn 18, they're viewed as adults and expected to navigate a new system by themselves. How do you think the federal government can better support young adults when they turn 18 and have to navigate things like the healthcare and tax system?**

The recommendations described above related to expanding family-based placements and care as well as older youth permanency are critical to improving outcomes for youth approaching age 18. Having strong, nurturing, and longstanding relationships are critical to making a successful transition to adulthood. In addition to taking action on permanency and family connections for older youth, the following actions are recommended:

- Enhance performance and accountability of youth-serving programs. A key feature of Title IV-B is the state plan requirements. These plans, also known as Child and Family Services Plans (or five-year IV-B plans) are intended to help states integrate and coordinate federal funding sources into a cohesive child welfare system that supports children, youth, and families. Plan requirements should be revised with the goal of making them drivers of accountability and more outcomes-focused, including requiring ongoing input from youth, parents and other caregivers who are involved in the system;
- Strengthen and support best practices through an expanded Court Improvement Program, funded through Title IV-B. Quality court proceedings, including youth involvement in their hearings, are associated with positive outcomes for youth.
- Increase awareness of Chafee services among youth by requiring that states notify them about available services, through caseworkers and during court hearings, starting at age 14.
- Double the overall investment in the Chafee program, as was done in 1999, so state and local agencies have adequate, flexible, and predictable resources given the expanded age eligibility made by the Family First Act. This will increase delivery of services and help lead to better outcomes in school, work and family. Along with increased investment, strengthen accountability measures to improve results.
- Improve impact of federal investments by enhancing the array of services. For example, building on best practice, require that HHS/ACF, in collaboration with young people from foster care and other stakeholders, develop a list of benchmark services to guide agencies in updating their Chafee programs and specify best practices around engaging and notifying youth. Incentivize agencies to improve delivery of services by encouraging greater reliance on community-based organizations.

- Remove barriers to youth accessing foster care beyond age 18 by eliminating eligibility criteria to better ensure participation in the programming and de-link Title IV-E financing eligibility from the defunct 1996 AFDC program so state and federal cost sharing can occur for all participating youth, which will encourage states to establish and enhance these programs for youth.
- Promote policy innovations such as the [SOUL Family legal permanency option](#), designed by young leaders with foster care experience with support from the Casey Foundation, proposes a promising alternative to aging out. It offers a new way to build strong families for young people ages 16 and older. In Kansas and Washington D.C., public and private partners are exploring how this approach would allow young people to establish permanent legal relationships with one or more adult caregivers, maintain ties to their birth parents and siblings, and receive mentoring and additional support from a network of caring adults. Youth in these families would receive benefits and services needed to support their learning, career preparation, housing and wellness along the path to adulthood.

Cordially,

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Will Kiefer, Executive Director, Bench Mark Program  
Committee on Ways and Means Pathways to Independence Hearing  
QFR - Representative Gregory Steube

**What specific benefits do you see youth in your program receiving when they have access to these types of resources?**

For many of the youth who attend Bench Mark Program on a daily basis, our facility is the only place in their lives where they can let their guard down, connect with positive people, and begin to envision what a different kind of life might look like for themselves and their families. With the strong, ever-present influence of social media in young people's lives, it is important to have places like Bench Mark where they can simply be a kid, without having to uphold a certain appearance. One of the main reasons that these youth choose to attend our program is because they know that they can depend on us for years at a time. In every mentoring service that we offer, we clarify expectations, we keep our promises, and we keep showing up. We specialize in problem-solving, and pride ourselves on being able to tackle just about any challenge that our youth present to us. Attending Bench Mark Program becomes a habit, and for many youth, the foundation upon which they begin to change their lives. They can make these life changes because they know that regardless of their circumstances at home, they have one consistently available, safe, trusted adult mentor at Bench Mark. Youth who attend Bench Mark Program on a regular basis begin to exhibit a set of qualities that facilitate significant life changes: they become open to support from trusted mentors, they re-engage in school, they don't let little challenges or obstacles derail them, they separate from negative influences, and they seek leadership opportunities.

The youth that Bench Mark Program serves have experienced high levels of childhood trauma, they are engaged in complicated juvenile justice and dependency systems, and they struggle to think positively about their futures. Bench Mark Program is a lifeline that these youth can hold onto for an extended period of time. We do not shift in and out of their lives, we stay consistently available through a series of different mentoring initiatives, sometimes in the background, but always there. Of all the benefits that youth receive at Bench Mark Program, the primary benefit is: we are a trustworthy, dependable, long-term problem-solving resource in their lives.

**What makes Bench Mark unique?**

Bench Mark Program is unique because it is consistently available to youth between ages 13-24, through some of the most challenging and formative years of their adolescence. What's more, the different initiatives at Bench Mark Program are not boring, outdated, or led by staff who are "out of touch." The majority of our staff are young, they grew up in the same community as our students, they know most of our students' families, and they are close enough in age that they can relate to many of the challenges facing our youth. It is the combination of having access to people who you like and trust, through program initiatives that you find fun and engaging, AND the opportunity to stick with those people and resources for years at a time while you grow up, that makes Bench Mark unique.

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COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS  
JUDICIARY SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE  
ON WEAPONIZATION

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-0917**

Work and Welfare Sub Hearing: *Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*

Wednesday, January 17, 2024

**Mr. Jordan Otero:**

Youth who age out of foster care often face an uphill battle. The Committee has an opportunity to ensure our child welfare programs better serve America's youth in a responsible way.

One step that we can take is a bill that I have authored with Dr. Neal Dunn, the Creating Accountable Respectful Environments (CARE) for Children Act, which addresses the shortage of foster home options for children by allowing cottage homes to be eligible for federal funds that other programs already have access to.

This bill is simple, straightforward, and direct. The bill simply adds "cottage family homes" to the options of federally supported housing for foster children. Cottage family homes offer a family-like living environment in a single-family residence with no more than two children per bedroom unless it is in the children's best interest. For example, in the case of keeping biological siblings together. The cottage "parents" can supervise and nurture around the clock creating a healthier, stable environment.

It's no secret that there is currently a shortage of foster homes in the United States. Smaller, more community-based homes provide an environment for older children, such as those between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, to learn basic home skills that many of us take for granted.

We need to make changes in our foster care system to provide more kids with homes and communities that allow for more hands-on opportunities to learn key, basic skills that will help them as they age into young adults.

My CARE for Children Act is a step in achieving that goal. As members of this subcommittee and the full committee work on fixes to Title IV-B and Title IV-E in child welfare, I respectfully request the CARE for Children Act be included in proposals advanced out of the Ways & Means Committee.

You mentioned having supportive foster parents in your testimony, emphasizing their crucial role in your journey to adulthood.

1. In your opinion, what qualities make a foster parent effective in providing necessary support for youth transitioning from care?
2. Furthermore, how can we ensure that all foster parents, whether in group homes or individual foster homes, are fully equipped to provide the love and support that youth need?

Focusing on the lack of support from the federal government to help navigate the Medicaid and other systems:

1. As soon as kids in the foster system turn 18, they're viewed as adults and expected to navigate a new system by themselves. How do you think the federal government can better support young adults when they turn 18 and have to navigate things like the healthcare and tax system?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Steube', written in a cursive style.

W. Gregory Steube  
Member of Congress

## Response to Representative Steube

You mentioned having supportive foster parents in your testimony, emphasizing their crucial role in your journey to adulthood.

1. In your opinion, what qualities make a foster parent effective in providing necessary support for youth transitioning from care?

I think qualities that foster parents should have that can help youth transitioning into adulthood are that they are willing to walk through things with their older youth. Often times people say, “well I figured this out by myself”, “if I can figure this out so can you”, “I won’t be there to always help you”, and etc. and I think that foster parents who understand that they are a can be a tool or a resource for their youth are people who can make a positive impact on these children. I think people who are well educated typically are the ones who can help our youth succeed. I think there is real value behind individuals who have post secondary education and beyond. Both of my foster parents had bachelor’s degrees and continued to educate themselves beyond college and I think being able to have a model of that evergrowing expansion education is important. I had college ambitions but I didn’t have anyone to help me navigate what that looked like until my foster parent’s were in my life. Another thing I have experienced is that families who are well supported in their own family or community setting would be a quality that is important. My foster parent’s family; their brothers, parents, and kin, all made me feel welcomed and loved in their spaces. I think that my foster parents needed that support as much as I did. To summarize, I believe people who are helpful, kind, educated, willing to learn, and supported are key qualities to what can be good indicators that someone is a good candidate as a foster parent.

2. Furthermore, how can we ensure that all foster parents, whether in group homes or individual foster homes, are fully equipped to provide the love and support that youth need?

I think that well there is no guarantee a family or person will work out as foster parents, I believe indicators that can help are asking the questions of; 'how did they do when raising their own children?' or 'how are they doing with raising their children?'. 'What do their family relationships look like?', 'did they have a model of what a successful family life looks like?'. I think generally a home that is involved in their community can be an indicator that they are prepared to help our youth. If they volunteer or work in an area of service to people, I think that this can show that they are willing and able to always put their best forward and are always considering the benefits for others. I believe homes that have good values that are often found in the bible and through Jesus are homes that can help our youth grow to love themselves and forgive themselves and others so that they have a healing journey through their experience in care. I am not talking about going to church or being religious, I am talking about those that look to God and Jesus for their life and live to serve. I think that the bible shows us how to love and care for others and that the values that are obtained there are essential to seeing anyone grow up and succeed.

Focusing on the lack of support from the federal government to help navigate the Medicaid and other systems:

1. As soon as kids in the foster system turn 18, they're viewed as adults and expected to

navigate a new system by themselves. How do you think the federal government can better support young adults when they turn 18 and have to navigate things like the healthcare and tax system?

I believe that the government can do better at funding projects to find groups that will help a youth understand their options after care/ and during their later stages of foster care. I believe that there is a window of opportunity for the government incentive departments for families and children across the country to hire individuals who have experienced foster care and have utilized and know about many different programs so that those most knowledgeable can help those who need to learn what is available to them. I think individuals who experienced care and turn 18 after their time should be able to have access to programs the same as individuals for those who did turn 18 in care because even though permanency may have been found or something happened to close that case I think that it narrows the impact of youth's whose lives we can make better. I believe that government facilities should have forms that are clear and easy to understand for current or former foster youth so that they have a better understanding of what they can access. I believe public educational systems should be told to have certain forms for foster youth and be incentivized to help our youth become further educated across the country. I think making the path of success very clear to someone who has grown up and experienced such a chaotic situation such as foster care, is very important and I think these are some of the few of many ways to do that.

**PUBLIC SUBMISSIONS FOR THE RECORD**

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Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

United States House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Work and Welfare

Written Testimony of Donna Butts, Executive Director, Generations United

Wednesday, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 2:00 PM

Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for your commitment to families and the opportunity to submit written testimony about the critical role of kinship families in the lives of older youth in foster care and how we can encourage greater access to kin for youth in care.

Generations United’s mission is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit for all. As the only national nonprofit focused solely on intergenerational solutions, Generations United acts as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration among a wide range of organizations focused on aging, children, and youth and provides a forum to explore areas of common ground to advance innovative public policies and programs.

For nearly twenty-five years, Generations United’s National Center on Grandfamilies has been a leading voice for issues affecting families headed by grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends. Through the Center, Generations United leads an advisory group of organizations, caregivers, and youth that sets the national agenda to advance public will in support of these families. The Center’s work is guided by the GRAND Voices Network of grandfamily caregivers representing 47 states and 13 tribes. Center staff conduct federal advocacy, train grandfamilies to advocate for themselves, and raise awareness about the strengths and needs of the families through an annual State of Grandfamilies report, media outreach, weekly communications, and awareness-raising events. Generations United, along with five national partners and an array of subject matter experts, also operates the first-ever national technical assistance center on grandfamilies and kinship families, known as the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network (Network). Through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Community Living, the Network is providing a new way for government agencies and nonprofit organizations in states, tribes, and territories to collaborate and work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries – all to improve supports and services for grandfamilies and kinship families now and into the future. More information can be found at [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org), [www.gksnetwork.org](http://www.gksnetwork.org), and [www.grandfamilies.org](http://www.grandfamilies.org).

When children and youth cannot remain in their parents’ care, research shows they do best in grandfamilies.<sup>1</sup> Grandparents and extended family step up and wrap children in the protective cocoon of family, providing roots and connection to culture, keeping siblings under one roof, and showering children with the one thing money cannot buy – love. Currently more than 2.4



million children and youth benefit from the sacrifices of grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends, and they thrive in this loving care. Compared to children in non-relative foster care, children in the care of kin are more likely to report that they “always feel loved”<sup>ii</sup>, and experience increased stability, better behavioral and mental health outcomes, more feelings of belonging and acceptance, greater preservation of cultural identity and community, and are more likely to achieve permanency through adoption or permanent guardianship. Notably, 34% of children and youth adopted from foster care are adopted by relatives.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite evidence of the strength of grandfamilies, kinship caregivers experience significant and unnecessary barriers to helping the children and youth they raise thrive. Many kinship caregivers miss out on financial assistance their grandfamilies may be eligible for because they are unaware of what benefits or supports are available to them, or they do not know who to ask for assistance.

It is important to note that for every child and youth being raised by relatives inside the foster care system, 18 children are raised by relatives outside of the system. These families usually step into this role with little to no warning and are left to navigate unfamiliar and complex systems to help meet the physical and cognitive health challenges of children and youth who come into their care, many of whom have experienced significant trauma. Many of the current child welfare funding streams are designed to serve children and youth within the foster care system only, which leaves many families who need access to basic benefits and supports to prevent the need for child welfare system involvement. The Family First Prevention Services Act expanded the use of Title IV-E funding to include prevention services for children, youth, and families at risk of entering the foster care system. The vast majority of grandfamilies do not come to the attention of the child welfare system, but still need the benefit of supports and services as the caregivers step in often unexpectedly to care for children and youth who usually come to them after being exposed to trauma. Title IV-B provides states with flexible funding to support grandfamilies/kinship families outside of foster care, such as through Kinship Navigator Programs, emergency concrete supports, and family stabilization services.

Even those children and youth who enter foster care with kin often receive inequitable supports. In order to receive foster care maintenance payments equal to those of non-kin foster parents, kinship caregivers must become licensed foster caregivers. While the recent rule from the Biden Administration allows for different licensing standards for kinship families, currently in many states those licensing requirements ignore the unique context and circumstances of kinship caregivers. Many grandfamilies face barriers to becoming licensed that have no impact on the child’s safety, receiving a lesser amount of financial support or no monthly financial support at all, despite the child being in the custody of the child welfare system.

Research indicates that children and youth in grandfamilies who receive services and support, such as financial and legal assistance, housing, food and nutrition supports, health services, and peer-to-peer supports, experience better outcomes than those whose grandfamilies don’t

receive services.<sup>iv</sup> But many grandfamilies lack access to services to help meet these basic needs, which can lead to greater child welfare system involvement and more children and youth in non-relative foster care, separated from their parents, families, homes, communities, culture, and all that is familiar. Reforms to the Title IV-B program can play an important role in improving supports and services for grandfamilies/kinship families, as well as in shaping child welfare policy and services nationwide to better support older youth in foster care.

Along with the following recommendations, Generations United aligns with the priorities outlined in the Focus IV-B on Families consensus recommendations and urges increased Title IV-B investments to ensure a strong, family-focused reauthorization.

#### **Recommendations for Supports for Kinship Families in Title IV-B**

**Help Kinship Navigator Programs meet evidence-based requirements by authorizing five years of mandatory kinship navigator funds instead of requiring them to be subject to the annual appropriations process.** Kinship Navigator Programs help connect grandfamilies to critical supports and services so that the children and youth thrive, and it prevents their unnecessary entry into foster care. A five-year authorization of mandatory funds would ensure states could develop and evaluate strong evidence-based programs that are tailored to their local needs. Since 2018, Congress has appropriated funds annually for kinship navigator programs to develop, operate and evaluate kinship navigator programs. These funds are designed to help the programs meet the evidence-based requirements and qualify them to draw down reimbursement from the Title IV-E as authorized in the Family First Act. While the annual appropriations have been critical to recent progress increasing kinship navigator services, making the funds subject to the annual appropriations process has resulted in funding gaps and uncertainty which make it difficult to plan, provide consistent programming, and conduct effective evaluation.

As a note, Kinship Navigator Programs have faced many challenges with the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse including: lack of clarity about the requirements, poor communication from the clearinghouse, and limited technical assistance to help answer questions and address common barriers. Because of these challenges, to date only four kinship navigator programs have been approved by the clearinghouse, with two of them designed primarily to serve kinship families raising children inside of foster care. Five years of reliable funding for these programs will ensure they have the necessary resources, time, and stability to develop evidence-based programs.

**Clarify that Title IV-B funding can be used to support and engage kin families.** This includes support services and activities around crisis stabilization services, conducting family finding, engaging extended family, re-establishing family relationships, including kin in planning for the children, and other services or assistance to strengthen and support kin.

**Authorize and fund a competitive grants program to support peer-to-peer delivered services.**

As noted by several of the hearing witnesses, including former foster youth Rebekka Behr and Jordan Otero, peer-to-peer support programs are crucial for youth navigating the child welfare system. Through our work, we often hear from kinship caregivers and youth raised in grandfamilies that peer services are some of the most valuable supports. Despite their demonstrated efficacy and their unique ability to build trust with youth and families, most peer support programs serving youth and caregivers in and around the child welfare system cannot access the key funding and support opportunities available to other programs. Authorize and fund a competitive grant program to support peer-to-peer delivered services.

**The purpose is to:**

- Support families, including youth, kinship caregivers, and parents, so they do not go through experiences with child welfare or related systems alone/isolated.
- Increase knowledge of how to navigate the child welfare system or related systems.
- Connect families to existing services and supports to enhance family well-being.

A broad range of entities would be eligible to apply for the competitive grants, but they must partner with a lived experience entity (which are organizations, groups, or collaborations whose primary mission is to put people with lived experience in positions to support other individuals going through similar experiences.) The collaboration would include passing through a substantial part of the funds to the lived experience entity.

**Expand “Adoption and Promotion Support Services” to include guardianships.** For many grandfamilies/kinship families, guardianship is the preferred permanency pathway for youth who cannot remain with their parents as it creates a legal relationship that provides a permanent family for the child without terminating parental rights- something children and youth in kinship families often do not wish to do. Guardianships address many family concerns that may prevent a child or youth from being adopted by relatives, including being responsive to long and proud Native American, Latino, African-American traditions of stepping in to care for relatives when parents have been unable. Furthermore, some tribal cultures simply do not believe in terminating parental rights or legally adopting kin.

**Dedicate additional Title IV-B funds to address barriers to licensure for kin, and train, recruit and retain high quality foster parents including kin,** particularly those caring for special populations such as sibling groups, children and youth with special behavioral health needs, adolescent and teen populations, and foster parents or other specialized placements for victims of sex trafficking. These funds could be used to help Title IV-E agencies implement kin-specific foster care licensing standards following [the new rule issued by the Administration for Children and Families](#), develop specialized kinship specific training for potential kinship foster parents, support the training and use of therapeutic kinship foster homes, and provide concrete support to help kin comply with licensing standards such as home modifications and safety equipment.

**Create additional dedicated Title IV-B funds for support services for kin caring for children who are not in the custody of the child welfare system.** This includes support for emergency services and concrete goods to help stabilize kinship families and provide for the child or

youth's wellbeing, preventing the need to enter child welfare system custody. Examples include but are not limited to: transportation assistance, respite care, legal assistance, clothing allowance, bedding, cleaning supplies, child car seats, child care, and limited utility and housing assistance.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today on behalf of Generations United and the grandfamilies and kinship families we believe in and support. For additional information please contact Chelsi Rhoades, Generations United's public policy and advocacy specialist, at [crhoades@gu.org](mailto:crhoades@gu.org) or (202)289-3979.

**Resources for Further Information and Recommendations:**

[Focus IV-B on Families Consensus Recommendations](#)

[Grandfamilies and Kinship Families: Strengths and Challenges Fact Sheet](#)

[Generations United's Annual State of Grandfamilies Reports](#)

[Grand Facts State Fact Sheets](#)

[Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center](#)

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<sup>i</sup> Generations United. (2023). Fact Sheet: Children Thrive in Grandfamilies. [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).

<sup>ii</sup> Wilson, L. & Conroy, J. Satisfaction of 1,100 children in out-of-home care, primarily family foster care, in Illinois' child welfare system. Tallahassee, FL: Wilson Resources, 1996. Retrieved from <http://www.eoutcome.org/Uploads/COAUploads/PdfUpload/SatisfactionInIllinoisChildWelfare.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Generations United. (2023). Fact Sheet: Children Thrive in Grandfamilies. [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.



January 26, 2024

Chairman Jason Smith  
 Ranking Member Richard Neal  
 House Committee on Ways and Means  
 1139 Longworth HOB  
 Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Public Comment on Urgent Matter - Ensuring Full Access to Federal Benefits for Foster Youth

Dear Chairman Jason Smith and Ranking Member Richard Neal,

My name is Amy Harfeld and I serve as the National Policy Director for a children's rights nonprofit organization, the [Children's Advocacy Institute](https://www.caichildlaw.org), based at the University of San Diego School of Law. We work to strengthen the rights of vulnerable youth, and children in and aging out of foster care, and to increase accountability within child welfare systems and beyond. I am writing to bring to your attention a critical issue affecting some of our nation's most vulnerable children—disabled and orphaned youth in our foster care system. These children, who have been abused or neglected and then removed from their homes, often receive Social Security disability, survivor, or other benefits, but rarely know it and almost never have access to these critical assets that could ease a transition into a successful transition into adulthood.

Unfortunately, foster care agencies routinely apply for these benefits without informing the child, their parents, or their attorney. Then, agencies request the benefit checks to be sent directly to them, diverting the money to offset the cost of the child's care- an expense squarely required by federal law to be paid by the states. 42 U.S. Code § 6729(a) establishes that all state foster care agencies are required to provide and pay for "foster care maintenance payments" "on behalf of each child who has been removed from the home of a relative . . ." Foster care maintenance is defined in 42 U.S. Code § 675 as "payments to cover the cost of (and the cost of providing) food,

clothing, shelter, [ ]. . .” This practice is not only incongruous with Congressional intent, discriminatory, and predatory but also a violation of our basic social contract to our nation’s most vulnerable children, to whom we are the legal parents. Agencies are accountable for acting in these children’s best interests but are instead siphoning federal dollars to pad state budgets rather than to provide security and opportunity for these youth.

As bipartisan Ways & Means Committee leadership [stated](#) after the release of a scathing 2021 [GAO Report](#) which exposed how poorly states are stewarding these federal dollars,

**“GAO’s report makes it evident we have work to do to make sure all foster youth receive and benefit from all SSA benefits for which they qualify and that benefits follow the child.[] SSA benefits are not always being used as intended, in the youth’s best interest, although there appears to be wide variation among states. We are specifically concerned [] about reports that benefits are being used to help state budgets instead of children.”**

The Children’s Advocacy has been at the forefront of driving national and state reform efforts for over a decade. Public awareness and media coverage such as the [investigative series published by NPR and the Marshall Project](#), have brought this issue to center stage in 2021, with states clamoring to get on the right side of this morally bankrupt practice that runs contrary to the very mission of our child protection system. [Child Trends published a piece](#) last week on this policy highlighting the strong desire of states to change and the federal leadership needed to support them and protect all foster youth.

**Currently, 27 states and jurisdictions have taken action to preserve the federal benefits of foster youth. [Missouri](#) just introduced a strong GOP-led bill, which was covered in a [FREOPP article](#) today:**

*Missouri State Senator Holly Thompson Rehder has introduced a [bill](#) prohibiting the state from using children’s benefits to pay for foster care costs. “It’s wrong for the government to take federal benefits owed to our vulnerable foster children. I am proud to sponsor legislation to protect foster children’s benefits, and hope that Missouri continues the national trend of ending this indefensible practice.”*

Within the last year, [Arizona](#) and [Washington D.C.](#) passed comprehensive legislation covering each of the elements of a model law, and mirroring the admirable provisions of the [Missouri](#) bill. To varying degrees, legislative or policy reform has also advanced in [Maryland](#), [Connecticut](#), [Nebraska](#), [New Jersey](#), [Alaska](#), [Illinois](#), [Oregon](#), [California](#), [Hawaii](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Washington](#), as well as in [New York City](#), [Los Angeles](#), and [Philadelphia](#). States with prospective or pending legislation include [Tennessee](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Michigan](#), [Minnesota](#), [Colorado](#), [New Hampshire](#), [Kansas](#), [Virginia](#), [Maine](#), and [Texas](#).

I urge the House Committee on Ways and Means to act with due haste in considering this important policy issue and the need for reform. The solution is easy, requires few if any federal dollars, and would make a transformational change for thousands of foster youth every year. It could mean the difference between homelessness and a security deposit, between filing for unemployment or purchasing a new car to get to work. The call to end this unethical policy is reaching a tipping point, and foster youth, practitioners, states, and Congress are poised to address this long-standing injustice.

This issue is not only a matter of justice and equity but also has significant implications for the well-being of these vulnerable children. I implore the committee to champion reforms that ensure foster youth have unimpeded access to the federal benefits they are entitled to receive, free from discriminatory practices and lack of responsible or ethical fiscal action by state agencies.

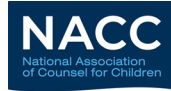
Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We anticipate a bill to be introduced in Congress in the coming weeks to address this and hope that you will prioritize this matter with the bipartisan support and attention it has received in the states. With your leadership, we can support states and meaningful progress in rectifying this injustice and securing a brighter future for foster youth across the nation.

Sincerely,



Amy Harfeld

Amy C. Harfeld, National Policy Director  
 Children's Advocacy Institute- [cachildlaw.org](http://cachildlaw.org)  
 E-Mail: [amyharf@hotmail.com](mailto:amyharf@hotmail.com) | Phone: 917-371-5191  
[Campaign to Preserve Foster Youth Benefits](#)



PROMOTING EXCELLENCE | BUILDING COMMUNITY | ADVANCING JUSTICE

January 29, 2024

Dear Members of the Subcommittee on Work and Welfare:

Thank you for your time and interest during the January 17, 2024 *Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*. The [National Association of Counsel for Children](#) (NACC) greatly appreciates the Subcommittee's bipartisan commitment to child welfare issues and, in particular, to reauthorization of Title IV-B of the Social Security Act.

Title IV-B covers a wide-ranging array of foster care services and supports, infusing states with funding for "upstream" prevention efforts and kinship supports, to "downstream" interventions for older youth. At every juncture, children and parents require effective legal counsel to advise them of these opportunities and to hold state governments accountable for responsible stewardship of resources. As witness Rebekka Behr from Florida testified about her own experience: "**Gaining legal representation became a game-changer** - ensuring that I obtained a driver's license, had the ability to see my family more, and that I aged out of care as a successful adult" [emphasis added]. Legal representation for older youth can make all the difference to ensuring that the "pathway to independence" is a safe and promising one.

This is why Congress must amend IV-B to ensure access to [legal counsel for children](#) and parents in foster care court proceedings. This reform enjoys bipartisan support<sup>1</sup>, is backed by a [strong body of research](#), and is [funded by the federal government](#). Title IV-B already mandates legal representation for abandoned infants; **upon request, I would be happy to share draft language to update 42 USC 622(b)(8)(B)** to expand this guarantee to all children and parents experiencing foster care court cases.

I invite you to review our [Policymaker's Guide to Counsel for Kids](#) and welcome the opportunity to talk more about this proposal. Please feel free to reach out to me using the contact information below. Thank you for your dedication to children, families, and the child welfare workforce in your jurisdiction and nationwide.

Sincerely,

Allison Green, JD, CWLS  
Legal Director, National Association of Counsel for Children  
[Allison.Green@NACCchildlaw.org](mailto:Allison.Green@NACCchildlaw.org); 202-230-9128

<sup>1</sup> Under former President Trump, the Department of Health and Human Services [changed long-standing administrative policy](#) to open federal funding for children's and parent's attorneys and [released important guidance](#) to the field to support implementation. [Executive Order 13930](#) further affirmed the former administration's commitment to this issue. Under President Biden, HHS has continued to promote this initiative, citing it as [a strategic priority](#) for the agency and [providing relevant testimony](#) to the Senate Judiciary Committee. Furthermore, the administration recently released [a proposed rule](#) that will codify funding for legal counsel within the Code of Federal Regulations.





*connecting teens • creating families • changing lives*

**Testimony of Susan Punnett, Executive Director of Family & Youth Initiative  
submitted for the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee,  
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging out of Foster Care  
January 17, 2024**

Family & Youth Initiative thanks the Subcommittee for convening this hearing on the critical issue of the challenges faced by young people aging out of foster care.

As you heard in testimony on January 17<sup>th</sup>, youth who age out of care face a more difficult transition to adulthood than their non-foster care peers. They are less likely to have a high school diploma or GED or to have started or completed post-secondary schooling; they are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed and earn less than their non-foster care peers; and more likely to have experienced homelessness as well as involvement with the criminal justice system.

This is not surprising. These are young people who have experienced the trauma of abuse or neglect, followed by the instability of foster care. Then they age out without a safety net: no adult to offer a place to stay, financial or moral support, a sounding board to work through job challenges, or someone to assure them they can succeed in college and should not drop out or give up.

Family & Youth Initiative (DCFYI) offers what we believe is the most important factor in changing outcomes for teens in foster care - a lasting relationship with at least one caring adult. We bring together adults and teens so they can get to know each other and form relationships that give teens mentors, weekend host parents, and adoptive families.

We provide additional programming to youth who have aged out of care through relationships they build with "Open Table" volunteers.

DCFYI is the only DC area organization that is focused solely on creating community and lasting relationships for youth in care.

We invite participating youth and adults to our ongoing weekend events where we get together to have fun, share in an activity and a meal, and get to know each other. It is relationships that start at the events that grow into what become adult-teen matches with adults serving as mentors, weekend host parents, committee community members (eg, extended family) and/or adoptive parents.

We believe that allowing youth and adults to get to know each other naturally and at their own pace leads to better and longer lasting matches. Teens who have experienced abuse or neglect followed by the trauma of being in foster care can be wary of new adults. Also that not every teen and every adult are a good match for each other. Teens in foster care have very little say of what adults are in their lives. So this is one place where they can say yes or no to a match. We only match a teen and adult if they both say they want to be matched.

It can take longer for matches to occur but we know once they do, these relationships will continue. For example, while we ask our mentors to commit to spending at least two years in relationship with their mentee, we also tell them we hope the relationships will continue much longer. We are proud that we connected adults and youth who are still in relationship now seven or eight years later.

Most importantly for DCFYI participants who remain in foster care until they age out, often the adults they got to know through participating with us are the only people they feel they can rely on.

Those adults help young people find employment and housing, access healthcare, learn to manage their money, get in to school, and navigate the many, many challenges of “adulting” for the first time. They attend (and often host) the celebrations, help furnish first apartments, and welcome new babies. They are listening ears, problem solvers, and trusted friends.

There are so many things one must learn and manage as an adult. Many of us had the benefit of family we could call on for advice, ask for financial support, or stay with as needed. Youth aging out of foster care rarely have family they can rely on the same way. At a minimum, no young person should age out of foster care without the lasting support of at least one caring, committed adult.

Ensuring youth have that support is also cost-effective. Aging out of foster care is enormously expensive for all of us. A study by the Jim Casey Youth Initiative estimates that, on average, we pay \$300,000 for each young person left to age out due to such social costs as public assistance and incarceration as well as lost wages over that person’s lifetime. The Foundation estimates that children who age out of foster care nationally cost society \$8 billion a year.

In just the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, 900 to 1,000 young people age out of foster care every year. Imagine how much better off they would be and how much more they could contribute to their communities if they each had at least one adult committed to staying in their lives and helping them successfully transition to adulthood.

We encourage the Subcommittee to continue examining this important issue and to seek solutions to an important social issue. Across the country, 20,000 young people age out of foster care and the problem is in deep need of an answer. We thank the Subcommittee for this hearing and would be happy to provide more information about the important work DCFYI and other organizations do to assist young people making a transition to adulthood.

**Testimony for the Record of Benjamin D. Hoffman, MD, FAAP  
On Behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics  
Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
“Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care”  
January 17, 2024**

Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and Honorable Subcommittee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the need to support youth aging out of foster care and for holding this hearing of critical importance. My name is Dr. Benjamin D. Hoffman. I am a pediatrician and the president of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). I am offering written testimony for the record for your January 17<sup>th</sup> hearing “Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care” on behalf of the AAP, a non-profit professional organization of 67,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical sub-specialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

The AAP believes that safety, permanency, and well-being are the critical precepts that should guide the work and mission of the child welfare system. Each of those precepts is deeply connected to the health and development of children and youth. For years, the AAP has advocated to improve child welfare policies to better support the needs of children and families, including youth aging out of foster care.

Unfortunately, insufficient funding and a lack of needed reforms have left many youth aging out of foster care without the necessary support and resources to help them thrive and establish the durable and meaningful connections they need with adults in their lives. This is why the AAP is grateful to the Subcommittee for holding this hearing. Congress has a unique opportunity to support youth aging out of foster care through an array of policy improvements, including innovative and comprehensive reauthorization of Title IV-B of the *Social Security Act*. Title IV-B funds key state, local, and Tribal services around family preservation, reunification, and overall child welfare services and systems development, and a comprehensive reauthorization of this bill can serve as a mechanism to better support youth aging out of foster care.

In 1986, Title IV-E of the *Social Security Act*, a complementary provision to Title IV-B, was amended to create the Independent Living Program, allowing states to receive funds to provide independent living services for youth aging out of foster care.<sup>i</sup> Under this and other laws, state child welfare agencies are required to work with youth aging out of foster care to develop a transition plan that includes housing, health insurance, education, local opportunities for mentors, workforce supports, and employment services.<sup>ii</sup> While Title IV-E, which provides resources for foster care placements and prevention of unnecessary foster care, is distinctly different from Title IV-B, the two complement each other and both can play an important role in

supporting youth aging out of foster care. Title IV-B reauthorization offers policymakers the opportunity to continue aligning federal child welfare resources with the best outcomes for families, based on research and the insights of individuals who have experienced the child welfare system. It also offers the opportunity to think about how to ensure Title IV-B complements Title IV-E after the historic enactment of the bipartisan *Family First Prevention Services Act*.

### **Funding & Resources**

The AAP strongly supports providing more resources and reforms to better support youth aging out of foster care. While current law does provide some support for youth aging out of foster care, transition aged adolescents still face substantial unmet needs. Youth transitioning out of foster care report that the most important support for working toward their educational and employment goals are job preparation skills, transportation, childcare, educational services, and overall life skills.<sup>iii</sup> They also have faced significant trauma and need high-quality trauma-informed mental health services.

Unfortunately, many youth who have transitioned out of foster care have described a lack of resources in the areas of employment, education, finances, housing, access to independent living classes, personal care, and networking.<sup>iv</sup> One study showed that fewer than half of young adults leaving foster care were currently employed at age 26, approximately half of the young adults who had worked during the past year reported earning \$9,000 or less annually, and more than a quarter had no earnings at all.<sup>v</sup> Another study found that 20% of youth who have aged out of foster care were chronically homeless, and this housing instability was associated with emotional and behavioral problems, physical and sexual victimization, criminal conviction, and high school dropout.<sup>vi</sup> The AAP urges Congress to increase funding and investments to support youth aging out of foster care and provide them with resources to flourish. This should include efforts to implement and expand peer support services for young people, to develop beneficial peer connections.

### **Mental Health & Trauma-Informed Care**

**The AAP also calls on Congress to provide mental health resources for youth transitioning out of foster care.** More than half of young adults leaving foster care have mental health needs.<sup>vii</sup> According to one study, more than a quarter of young adults in foster care (25.2%) have been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is higher than the general U.S. population (4.0%) and nearly twice the rate of that experienced by American war veterans (Vietnam War: 15%; Afghanistan War: 6%; Iraq War: 12-13%).<sup>viii</sup> Unfortunately, many youth who have aged out of foster care face substantial obstacles in receiving necessary medical and psychiatric care. In one study of youth in foster care, only 47% of youth in foster care had health insurance as they prepared to leave foster care.<sup>ix</sup> Under the *Fostering Connections to Success*

*and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*, state child welfare agencies are required to develop transition plans with youth before they age out of foster care. However, this study reflects a need for the federal government to work with child welfare agencies to ensure compliance with the transition plan requirement and ensure that youth transitioning out of foster care are receiving information in an effective and supportive way. The lack of health insurance among youth aging out of foster care is a significant problem, especially as young adults in foster care are more likely to have health conditions that limit their daily activities, report more emergency department visits and hospitalizations than other young adults, and suffer medical problems that are left untreated because they lack health insurance.<sup>x</sup>

Additionally, last year, the AAP published a new report, [“Family First Implementation: A One-Year Review of State Progress in Reforming Congregate Care,”](#) which reviewed state-level implementation of the congregate care reforms included in Family First. This report was developed with experts from Chapin Hall of the University of Chicago, individuals with lived experience in foster care (including young adults who aged out of foster care), and pediatricians to examine state-level implementation of the congregate care reforms contained in Family First. As a result of this survey of all 50 states and targeted focus groups, one of the key policy recommendations from the report was that **states need additional federal resources (such as technical assistance and funding) for states to be able to provide an array of comprehensive mental health services**. While this report focused on implementation of a key policy in Title IV-E, it provides clear implications for the role of Title IV-B in promoting access to community-based prevention and mental health services. **The AAP urges Congress to include investments and improvements for Title IV-B to complement ongoing bipartisan mental health efforts and support a trauma-responsive child welfare system, including for youth transitioning out of foster care.**

#### **Effective Data Collection**

The AAP also calls on Congress to improve quality child welfare data collection, which is crucial to the improvement of children’s health and wellbeing. **Specifically, the AAP calls on Congress to support and provide effective and robust data collection tools to help state and local child welfare agencies identify the needs of youth aging out of foster care.** For example, youth aging out of foster care have the option to elect Medicaid coverage until 26 years of age.<sup>xi</sup> Improved data collection can help inform Medicaid agencies, child welfare agencies, and other stakeholders whether youth aging out of foster care are enrolling in Medicaid, choosing other healthcare coverage options, or continue to lack access to healthcare coverage. If youth aging out of foster care continue to lack coverage or access to appropriate and comprehensive health care, then these data can inform efforts to best support these youth in accessing quality healthcare. Effective and robust data collection is needed to ensure that good public policy is truly effective and being implemented in ways that youth aging out of foster care find helpful and supportive.

By collecting information related to child health and identifying trends, Congress can help better promote the health and wellbeing of youth transitioning out of the foster care system. This can provide long-term benefits to the youth and save costs in the long term, and the AAP urges Congress to provide the necessary resources to support effective and robust data collection.

**Conclusion:** Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. The AAP urges Congress to pass a long-term, comprehensive Title IV-B reauthorization that includes resources and reforms that support youth aging out of foster care. The AAP looks forward to working with the subcommittee and the rest of Congress to improve the child welfare system and improve the health and well-being of children and their families. If the AAP can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact Zach Laris in our Washington, D.C. office at 202/347-8600 or [zlaris@aap.org](mailto:zlaris@aap.org).

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<sup>ii</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children. "Youth and families. Independent living initiatives." Available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/pi8701.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, Pub L No. 110–351, 122 Stat 3949 (2008). Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/110/plaws/publ351/PLAW-110publ351.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> Thompson HM, Wojciak AS, Cooley ME. "The experience with independent living services for youth in care and those formerly in care." *Child Youth Serv Rev*. 2018; 84:17–25. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740917306916>.

<sup>v</sup> *Id.*

<sup>vi</sup> Courtney M, Dworsky A, Brown A, Cary C, Love K, Vorhies V. "Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26." Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; 2011. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264883847\\_Midwest\\_Evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_Adult\\_Functioning\\_of\\_Former\\_Foster\\_Youth\\_Outcomes\\_at\\_Age\\_26](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264883847_Midwest_Evaluation_of_the_Adult_Functioning_of_Former_Foster_Youth_Outcomes_at_Age_26).

<sup>vii</sup> Fowler PJ, Toro PA, Miles BW. "Pathways to and from homelessness and associated psychosocial outcomes among adolescents leaving the foster care system." *Am J Public Health*. 2009;99(8):1453–1458. Available at: <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2008.142547>.

<sup>viii</sup> Pecora PJ, Kessler RC, Williams J, et al. "Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. The Foster Care Alumni Studies." Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs; 2005. Available at: [https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/AlumniStudies\\_NW\\_Report\\_ES.pdf](https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/AlumniStudies_NW_Report_ES.pdf).

<sup>ix</sup> Pecora PJ, Kessler RC, Williams J, et al. "Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. The Foster Care Alumni Studies." Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs; 2005. Available at: [https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/AlumniStudies\\_NW\\_Report\\_ES.pdf](https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/AlumniStudies_NW_Report_ES.pdf).

<sup>x</sup> Jaudes P; Council on Foster Care, Adoption, and Kinship Care and Committee on Early Childhood. "Health care of youth aging out of foster care." *Pediatrics*. 2012;130(6):1170–1173. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-2603>.

<sup>xi</sup> Stolfus E, Baumrucker EP, Fernandes-Alcantara AL, Fernandez B. "Child welfare: Health care needs of children in foster care and related federal issues." December 16, 2014. Available at: <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R42378.html>. See also: Szilagyi MA, Rosen DS, Rubin D, Zlotnik S; Council on Foster Care, Adoption, and Kinship Care; Committee on Adolescence; Council on Early Childhood. "Health care issues for children and adolescents in foster care and kinship care." *Pediatrics*. 2015;136(4). Available at: [www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/136/4/e1142](http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/136/4/e1142).

<sup>xii</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Child Health Financing. Medicaid policy statement. *Pediatrics*. 2013;131(5). Available at: [www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/131/5/e1697](http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/131/5/e1697).



## Submission for the Hearing Record

House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare

Hearing on

*Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging out of Foster Care*

January 17, 2024

Dear Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis and Subcommittee Members:

The Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) is a nonprofit organization that ensures policymakers work across party lines to craft bipartisan solutions. We believe the best solutions emerge when policy ideas and political principles from both sides come together to create something greater than the sum of its parts. We also believe bipartisanship is more critical than ever which is why BPC is a hard-working advocate for bipartisanship in Washington D.C.

Through BPC's new [Child Welfare Initiative](#) (CWI), we look forward to engaging with the subcommittee in the coming months as it considers ways to improve outcomes for children and families through the reauthorization of the Title IV-B program. We commend the subcommittee for its interest in [reimagining child welfare financing](#) and look forward to engaging in discussions about how Title IV-B and Title IV-E can be retooled to be drivers of more effective and accountable systems. Included in our statement is additional information about the CWI, highlighting its focus on child welfare financing reform, and several resources that may be of interest to the subcommittee.

[About the Child Welfare Initiative](#)

BPC launched its CWI to facilitate the development and implementation of effective, bipartisan policies. The CWI publicly launched in November 2023 with the release of findings from a national Harris Poll about the public's attitudes on the child welfare system. Prior to the launch, BPC, guided by input from key advisors, conducted an extensive assessment of the child welfare landscape to understand the overall environment as well as to gain an understanding of the ideas and attitudes of stakeholders and the general public about child welfare issues. In the landscape assessment, we also examined trends in policymaking and program implementation. We found:

- widespread consensus on the challenges that child welfare agencies face,
- strong agreement among stakeholders on the direction child welfare should be going, and
- gained an understanding of the difficulty in building common ground solutions.

These findings and insights shaped the design and focus of the CWI, which is to facilitate stakeholder conversations to develop and elevate effective, bipartisan policy opportunities and improve outcomes for children and families. Other issues that are relevant to the scope of the subcommittee's child welfare work, include:

- improving federal child welfare financing and accountability to better, meet unique community needs;
- continuing the positive progress on supporting kinship families;
- addressing the mental health needs of youth and families;
- assisting agencies with implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act; and
- improving the policies and practices that govern the front end of child welfare systems; and others.

In the coming weeks, the CWI will convene two work groups on: 1) child welfare financing and accountability, and 2) issues related to differentiating between child neglect and poverty. The work groups will inform bipartisan policy development and program implementation by facilitating policy discussions that lift up diverse perspectives; analyzing legislation and identifying opportunities for bipartisan agreement; and linking decision makers with useful resources to ensure that policy is informed by evidence and insights from those in the community who are most affected by decisions.

Specifically, the child welfare financing work group will develop recommendations on how to improve federal child welfare financing to better align with desired results and improve accountability. Reform issues the work group will study include: 1) enhanced flexibility to respond to local needs while also incentivizing best practice, 2) improved system accountability for child and family outcomes rather than an over-reliance on process measures, 3) responsiveness to changing levels of need, and 4) administrative efficiencies. The work group also will assess lessons learned from federal waiver projects; implementation thus far of the Family First Prevention Services Act; and more.

In addition, BPC's Child Welfare Initiative is collaborating with [BPC's Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force](#). The Task Force includes a Congressional working group with several Honorary Members of Congress: Senators Tina Smith (D-MN), Katie Britt (R-AL) and Representatives Brittany Pettersen (D-CO) and Lisa McClain (R-MI). The task force will develop evidence-based, actionable recommendations for Congress and the administration aimed at addressing the severe youth mental health and addiction crisis in the U.S. We are confident that the collective efforts of the Child Welfare Initiative and the Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force will yield a series of excellent recommendations for Congress. Our work in this area is motivated by a sense of urgency to finding solutions to the youth mental health crisis, including for foster youth. As you know, youth who have spent time in foster care have significant mental health needs associated with childhood trauma. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that mental and behavioral health is the largest unmet health need for children and teens in foster care.



### Resources

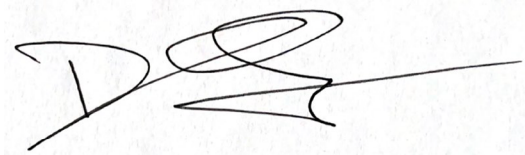
Several resources already issued by the CWI may be of interest to the subcommittee including:

- [Key Findings](#) from BPC Child Welfare Landscape Assessment, referenced above.
- [A 50-Review](#) of State Child Welfare Legislation based on an analysis of over 500 bills introduced in 2022 and 2023. The review points to issues where there is bipartisan action and support, including:
  - the Indian Child Welfare Act;
  - improving system oversight;
  - improving the front end of the child welfare continuum;
  - improving child maltreatment prevention and family preservation services;
  - strengthening kinship caregiving; and
  - addressing workforce issues.
- [Findings from a national poll](#) on public attitudes toward the child welfare system, also referenced above, showing that Americans have an understanding of the complexity of child welfare issues. They hold strong opinions about the system's operations and parental responsibility and also care deeply about both child safety and family unity. Among the findings:
  - Respondents see the child welfare system's mission as two-fold: ensuring child safety and strengthening parents.
  - Americans are in support of engaging extended family members when parents face challenges.
  - Two-thirds of respondents agree that child safety and family assistance should be a shared effort between government and community/religious organizations.
  - Respondents are aware of the overwhelming challenges child welfare systems face, including funding, resources, bureaucracy, and negativity bias in media coverage. Yet they believe the system generally does more good than harm.
  - Additional findings are presented in this [PowerPoint presentation](#) and were the focus of BPC's launch event which included a discussion of the findings with key experts in the field.

We commend the subcommittee for its bipartisan leadership and recent hearings on child welfare issues. We celebrate the long-standing bipartisanship that underpins the legislative history of federal child welfare policies and are encouraged by the ongoing bipartisanship. We also see state and local lawmakers from both sides leading child welfare reforms to strengthen families and ensure children's safety. Despite the many indicators of bipartisan support for child welfare issues, strong differences and divides exist. To this end, BPC is pleased to leverage its role as a trusted convener to cultivate dialogue among child welfare stakeholders with diverse views and experiences.

We look forward to being a resource to the subcommittee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Stangler', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dane Stangler

Managing Director of Strategic Initiatives, Business, Child Welfare  
Bipartisan Policy Center



**Comments for the Record**  
**United States House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Ways and Means**  
**Subcommittee on Work & Welfare**  
**Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**  
**Wednesday, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024 2:00 PM**  
**By Eric Mayo**  
**Brightpoint**

Thank you to Chairman Smith, Subcommittee Chair LaHood, and Ranking Member Davis for the opportunity to provide written comment for today's hearing.

Brightpoint, based in Illinois and formerly known as Children's Home & Aid, is a statewide family services organization with programs ranging from child welfare and mental health and wellness to early childhood care and education, parent support and youth services. Last year, we served 29,810 children and families in 67 counties throughout Illinois. Through our work, we strive to advance the well-being of children by supporting families and challenging the systemic, multi-generational cycle of racial, social, and economic inequality.

In our experience, the best way to support youth aging out of foster care is ensuring they have the skills and access to the resources they need to be independent. In many parts of the country, especially in Illinois, a driver's license is the key to that independence. While learning to drive may be a quintessential teenage experience, for many youth in care, they are unable to access this basic right of passage. That is why we strongly urge this committee and Congress to pass the bipartisan Foster Youth and Driving Act (H.R. 1446), sponsored by Representative Davis and Representative Bacon. This legislation would direct state foster care and adoption assistance programs to help youth in care earn their license and allow states to utilize federal funds to help youth in care overcome common barriers to earning their driver's license.

Several years ago, we worked with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) on a pilot program to provide more financial resources to youth in



care looking to earn their driver's license. From our research to create and implement this program, we want to highlight several barriers to earning a driver's license that youth in Illinois face that the Foster Youth and Driving Act would solve.

**1. Driver's Education:** In Illinois, school districts can charge up to \$250 per student for driver's education without requiring a waiver from the state,<sup>1</sup> and some school districts charge up to \$500.<sup>2</sup> Private driving schools are generally more expensive than that, so many families are unable to cover that expense for youth in their care.

**2. Practice Hours/Access to Practice Vehicles:** Illinois requires those under 18 to complete 50 hours of driving practice before being allowed to take the road test, with 10 of those hours occurring at night.<sup>3</sup> Access to a vehicle for practice is often a barrier as foster parents may not have a car, foster families may not allow the youth to use the family car, or the youth in care may reside in a congregate care setting. Private driving lessons are available through commercial driving schools, but they are costly. In addition to needing a vehicle to practice, applicants must provide their own vehicle when they take the road test to become licensed. Lack of access to a vehicle was one of the primary concerns we heard from youth in care and staff on why youth in care did not obtain their license.

**3. Auto Insurance:** Automobile insurance can be expensive, especially for young adults, and DCFS does not allow foster parents to add their foster children to their auto insurance policy. According to data from carinsurance.com, adding teenagers to an auto insurance policy in Illinois increases the cost of the policy by 130 percent, to \$3,029 per year.<sup>4</sup> An individual policy for an 18-year-old male in Illinois would be significantly higher – \$4,887 per year.<sup>5</sup> The financial assistance offered by this bill would allow foster youth the ability to afford this costly but necessary expense.

States that have already implemented programs for foster youth to earn their driver's license have seen significant benefits for foster youth. According to a study of the

<sup>1</sup> 105 ILCS 5/27-24.2. Available at <https://ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/010500050K27-24.2.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newtrier.k12.il.us/Page/1937>

<sup>3</sup> Illinois Secretary of State's Office. "Illinois GDL Parent-Teen Driving Guide."

[https://www.ilsos.gov/publications/pdf\\_publications/dsd\\_a217.pdf](https://www.ilsos.gov/publications/pdf_publications/dsd_a217.pdf), pg 7

<sup>4</sup> Martin, Erik. "How much does it cost to add a teenager to car insurance?"

<https://www.carinsurance.com/Articles/adding-teen-driver-cost.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> see 4



Keys to Independence program in Florida, foster youth who had their driver's license or learner's permit were more likely to have a GED or high school degree and were more likely to be employed than those that didn't have a license or permit.<sup>6</sup>

As this Committee considers how the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress can support older youth in the foster care system, we strongly believe that the Foster Youth and Driving Act can make a meaningful difference for young adults aging out of the child welfare system.

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<sup>6</sup> Embrace Families Florida. "Report to Congress – Keys to Independence." <https://keystoindependencefl.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Report-to-Congress.pdf>, pg. 2



**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Work & Welfare**

*Written Comments for Hearing, "Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth  
Aging Out of Foster Care"*

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, Subcommittee Chairman LaHood, Subcommittee Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the House Committee on Ways and Means, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) is a coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies that since 1920 has worked to serve children and families who are vulnerable. Our expertise, leadership and innovation on policies, programs, and practices help improve the lives of millions of children across the country. Our impact is felt worldwide.

We are grateful to the Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this important hearing and we appreciate the opportunity to submit our recommendations to better support young people transitioning from foster care to independence. CWLA acknowledges and applauds the long history of bipartisan leadership on child welfare issues.

Nearly 20,000 young people transition from foster care to independence without the benefit of formal reunification or an alternative permanency outcome each year. We share the Committee's desire to better support this population of young adults to ensure they can successfully transition to adulthood. During the hearing, we heard many important themes and good ideas with which we agree, which we will highlight below. We will focus on key areas of support for older youth in foster care: extended foster care, mentoring, mental and behavioral health services, and caregiver and caseworker stability.

**Extended Foster Care**

We believe extending foster care services beyond age 18 continues to be the best way to support older youth. As you know, society has changed since Congress first directed federal foster care to end at age 18 in 1980 – traditional paths to adulthood no longer include finding a full-time job

shortly after high school and retaining that job for years, building long-term stability and security. Immediate marriage, enrollment, or being drafted into the military have changed as well, happening less commonly than in the past. Even education has changed, with fewer students completing two- and four-year degrees on time. With rising costs of living and fewer opportunities available, many young adults choose to live at home and rely on the support of their families well past high school as they seek education, employment, and stable housing; why do we expect their peers in foster care to become fully independent on their eighteenth birthday? We must ensure that young people in foster care have access to similar supports as they transition to adulthood and independence.

Federal data tells us that compared to youth that exit foster care at age 18, youth who remain in care have better outcomes across multiple measures. According to the National Youth in Transition Database (NYDT) report to Congress in February 2020, youth who remain in care have higher rates of employment, housing, school attendance and graduation, and health coverage. They also have lower rates of incarceration, drug treatment referrals, and giving birth or fathering a child.<sup>1</sup>

Since the passage of the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*, states have had the option to claim Title IV-E funding for extended foster care up to age 21; to date, 28 states, the District of Columbia, and nine Tribes have extended Title IV-E foster care for youth beyond age 18. Mr. Lloyd's testimony highlighted the need for more states to give young people in care the option to extend foster care past age 18 to support older youth. Mr. Otero, when asked how extended foster care impacted his life, noted that he would not be where he is today without the additional support he received in his early years of adulthood; this support allowed him to be resilient and to ultimately be successful and independent on his own.

CWLA has endorsed H.R. 7010, the bipartisan *Increasing Access to Foster Care Through 21 Act*, introduced by Representatives Chu and Houchin, which would incentivize states to extend foster care through age 21. The Increasing Access to Foster Care Through 21 Act would provide a financial incentive to states to take up the option to extend care by removing Title IV-E income eligibility requirements for youth ages 18-21, ensure that youth who voluntarily leave care at 18 would have the ability to re-enter care should they need to, ensure categorical eligibility for extended care for youth ages 18 through 21, and request guidance on how caseworkers can better connect youth in foster care with Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) youth job programs.

Although we believe that extending foster care through age 21 should be mandated for all states, this bill builds on the advances in supports and service provision made by states that currently

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<sup>1</sup> NYDT Report to Congress. Administration on Children and Families. Children's Bureau. February 18, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/nytd-report-congress>

extend foster care beyond age 18 and is an important step toward ensuring that more young people in foster care have the option to remain in care.

### **Mentoring**

Several of the panelists spoke of the need for more supportive adults in the lives of older youth in foster care, and one way to foster this support is through high-quality mentorship programs. Mr. Kiefer and Ms. Behr's testimony and answers to questions were particularly helpful in illustrating the positive impacts of mentors on the lives of older youth in care.

CWLA has been generally supportive of mentoring proposals in the past, as we know that young people flourish when they have supportive adults they can rely on. We caution the Committee to be thoughtful when considering mentoring proposals for Title IV-B reauthorization this year, as there can be significant negative consequences to young people when mentorships are disrupted or discontinued. The Grants for Programs for Mentoring Children of Prisoners (Sec. 439. [42 U.S.C. 629i]) created during the 2002 reauthorization of Title IV-B part 2, Promoting Safe and Stable Families was ultimately discontinued due to concerns over the rates of failure in some programs, which in many cases can cause added loss for the children and youth being mentored.

Children in foster care have categorically experienced trauma, maltreatment, and loss of parents or caregivers through either separation or death. Additionally, many children and youth involved in the child welfare system have significant mental and behavioral health needs. When a mentor is unprepared or underprepared for the responsibilities and difficulties of establishing a caring relationship with a child or youth who has experienced this kind of loss or a child with a higher level of needs, it can lead to the mentor choosing not to continue with the program. This disruption results in yet another loss, yet another adult who doesn't stay, for the child being served, potentially exacerbating their past trauma in the process.

Any bill or proposal to provide mentoring for youth in foster care needs to address the underlying challenges potential mentors will face and how mentoring programs for children in care including children whose parents have been incarcerated will prepare mentors on potential challenges. It will need to have strong provisions that ensure adequate screening, training, and support of volunteer mentors to keep them in the program, thoughtful and rigorous selection and matching processes for children and mentors, trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive approaches to program implementation, and regular evaluation of outcomes for both child and adult participants.

### **Mental Health**



There is currently an emergency in children's mental health.<sup>2</sup> Mental and behavioral health is the largest unmet health need for children and teens in foster care,<sup>3</sup> with up to 80% of children in foster care having significant mental health issues compared to approximately 18-22% of the general population.<sup>4</sup> Older youth in and exiting foster care need additional mental and behavioral health support. We are supportive of the Title IV-B mental health bills that have been introduced or are in the process of being proposed that would increase attention to mental health – these bills ensure timely screening and identification of mental health concerns and promote connection to services through peer navigation and set-aside funding.

However, the bill text and proposals we have seen do not address the service gaps and barriers that exist in the mental health system and prevent children, youth and families from accessing care. Timely assessment of children and youth in care is good, but it is unhelpful if required services cannot be accessed due to lack of providers, long wait times, or gaps in health coverage. In the past too many families, in desperation and as a last resort, have turned to the child welfare system or the courts to access mental health care for their children. We must provide these families with better options. Service navigation is helpful only when services are plentiful; it does not meaningfully address these same issues. Setting aside funding for child welfare agencies to hire specialized staff is useful, but without direction and enforcement on the mental health system to fix these barriers, these funds ultimately will not be able to solve the underlying lack of access to services. Public child welfare agencies do not typically provide mental health services, but rather rely on community-based service providers that are supported by the mental health agency and state Medicaid program; requiring child welfare agencies to provide mental health services to youth in foster care when they do not exist in that community sets the agency and the youth up to fail.

In addition to the current bills that have been introduced, we would propose that the committee consider creating a program similar to the Regional Partnership Grants (RPGs) to address the lack of access to mental health services. The strength of the RPG program is that it requires the local substance use entities to participate fully in the planning and implementation, with some accountability to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) alongside the Children's Bureau. We recommend the creation of a competitive grant program (with new funding) that would require SAMHSA and Medicaid to participate with child welfare agencies in the effort to address the mental health concerns of children and older youth in foster

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<sup>2</sup> "American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021, October). AAP, AACAP, CHA declare national emergency in children's mental health. Author. <https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/17718/AAP-AACAP-CHA-declare-national-emergency-in?autologincheck=redirected>

<sup>3</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021, July). Mental and behavioral health needs of children in foster care. Author. <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/foster-care/mental-and-behavioral-health-needs-of-children-in-foster-care/>

<sup>4</sup> Children's Bureau and Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2023). National Foster Care Month 2023: Key facts and statistics. Author. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth/awareness/facts/>

care and would coordinate care continuity after exit from care.

### **Education**

The improvements made to the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program over the past 25 years help states provide services to young people as they age out of foster care. The program helps children who are eligible make the transition to self-sufficiency through such services as assistance in earning a high school diploma, support in career exploration, vocational training, job placement and retention, and training in daily living skills. In addition to the Medicaid coverage, the program allows up to 30% of funds to be used for room and board.

In 2001, Congress authorized an additional \$60 million in discretionary funds for education and training vouchers for youth eligible for the Foster Care Independence Program and youth adopted from foster care after age 16. The Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) program provides assistance of up to \$5,000 per year for the cost of attending an institution of higher education for youth who age out of foster care or are adopted after age 16. Funding for this program has never reached the authorized amount of \$60 million with funding set at \$44 million in 2023.

It is imperative that Congress support pathways to training and higher education for older youth in foster care, as these supports will help youth to attain gainful employment and stability after they exit foster care. As Mr. Lloyd explained, eligibility for Chafee services has expanded but funding has not been increased to match the need. We ask the Committee to consider increasing authorized funding levels for the Chafee Foster Care to Independence Program and the ETVs, and we ask leadership and members to use their influence with Appropriators to secure additional discretionary funding in the FY 2025 appropriations legislation.

To this end, CWLA has also endorsed H.R. 5562, the *Fostering Success in Higher Education Act*, introduced by Subcommittee Ranking Member Danny K. Davis (D-IL), Representative Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL), and Senator Bob Casey (D-PA), to improve college access, retention, and graduation rates for foster and homeless youth. Although outside this subcommittee's jurisdiction, we would ask Committee Members also on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce to support this bill's passage.

### **Driving Support**

Both Mr. Otero and Ms. Behr highlighted the barriers that lack of transportation creates for youth exiting foster care to independence. Transportation can be a significant barrier for youth in foster care, particularly in suburban and rural areas where public transportation options are limited or nonexistent. Possessing a driver's license allows young people to gain employment, pursue

education opportunities, and gain independence and success. The costs associated with acquiring a license, insurance, and a vehicle can be particularly burdensome for youth in foster care and youth who have recently exited foster care.

CWLA has endorsed H.R. 1446, the bipartisan *Foster Youth and Driving Act*, which would provide older youth in care with driving assistance and support. This bill should be included in a Title IV-B reauthorization package.

### **Caregiver Stability**

Mr. Lloyd highlighted the need to promote stability for older youth in foster care, who are more likely to have multiple foster care placements and are more likely to reside in a congregate care setting during their stay in foster care. It is essential that we further support kinship caregivers and kin-finding programs and initiatives, as kinship care should be the first option when a child or youth must be separated into out-of-home care. Title IV-B reauthorization offers opportunities to better support workers in prioritizing kinship care and to better support kinship caregivers who are taking care of children in their homes.

It is also necessary for child welfare agencies to recruit and retain high-quality foster parents for older youth in foster care who cannot be placed with kin. The NYDT report noted that family foster home placements and fewer total foster placements showed more positive results in every outcome category. Fewer foster care placements and placement with families were associated with having more employment-related skills and achieving a high school degree.

However, there is a growing shortage of foster families across the nation, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Anecdotally, we have heard that states are losing up to 50% of their licensed foster parents, citing the lack of support for foster families, the rising cost of providing care for children, workforce issues at the child welfare agencies, and the higher levels of need for and lack of access to mental and behavioral health support for children in care.

There are opportunities in both Titles IV-B and IV-E to increase supports for foster parents, and we applaud the Subcommittee on the House passage of the *Recruiting Families with Data Act*, an important bill to better understand what is needed to recruit and retain foster families. We encourage the subcommittee to introduce and pass legislation guaranteeing core supports for foster parents that are reimbursable through Title IV-E funds. We echo here our comments on improving mental health supports for children and youth from above; incentivizing state child welfare, mental health, and Medicaid agencies to work together to address the mental and behavioral health needs of youth in foster care will also result in additional resources and support being made available for foster parents who are struggling to meet the needs of the children and youth in their care.

Recognizing the lack of existing data and information about foster parents, CWLA partnered with the National Foster Parent Association to conduct a survey of current and former foster parents to better understand their needs and experiences. We found that for most foster parents, the maintenance payments are not enough to cover the cost of caring for a child. We also ask the Subcommittee to consider additional financial compensation for foster parents through Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments and through a Foster Care Tax Credit for families providing care on a short-term basis. There is also a need to address rising costs of housing, food, child care, and health care for foster children and families.

### **Workforce Concerns**

Mr. Lloyd's answers to Committee members' questions highlighted the need for stability for older youth in foster care, which includes caseworker stability. Supporting the workforce is a key component of achieving better outcomes for children and youth: a Government Accountability Office (GAO) analysis of 27 available Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) in 2003 showed that staff shortages, high caseloads, and worker turnover were factors impeding progress toward the achievement of federal safety and permanency outcomes.<sup>5</sup> The report noted that staffing shortages and high caseloads disrupt case management by limiting their ability to establish and maintain relationships with children and families. Research in Milwaukee and Illinois suggests that children are more likely to achieve permanency if they are assigned fewer workers over the course of their stay in foster care.<sup>6</sup>

A well-trained and well-staffed child welfare workforce is vital to supporting older youth in care, so it is imperative that Congress support states in recruiting and retaining qualified caseworkers with expertise in serving older youth. In past hearings, your members have heard testimony from youth formerly in foster care (lived experience) who have recounted instances whereby their lives and trajectory have been helped by a key caseworker with whom they had an ongoing relationship – we must support these relationships however we can.

Title IV-B reauthorization offers an opportunity to address the workforce crisis. CWLA recommends the following investments and policy changes:

1. Increase funding for workforce development and training. There is \$20M designated for workforce development in Title IV-B, dependent on caseworkers visiting families monthly. Increase this set aside to \$60M.

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<sup>5</sup> HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff. Government Accountability Office. March 2003. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-03-357.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The Impact of Turnover on Families Involved in Child Welfare. National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. 2023. Retrieved from <https://ncwwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-Impact-of-Turnover-on-Families-Involved-in-Child-Welfare.pdf>

2. Promote recruitment and retention. There are several promising practices that are helping agencies address these key issues, and Congress create new competitive or formula grants in Title IV-B of the Social Security Act with additional funding for states to address both recruitment and retention.
3. Increase funding for prevention and family preservation. Programs and funding that focus on preventing child abuse and neglect before it happens and keeping children safely in their homes help to reduce the number of children entering the child welfare system. Congress should increase the availability of funding in PSSF to reduce caseloads for workers by keeping families together.
4. Compile and disseminate best practices. Congress should create taskforces or direct existing entities to compile and disseminate best practices on nationwide issues, such as creating psychological safety and wellness for staff, racial disparities in child welfare and promoting a diverse workforce and reducing barriers to social work licensure.<sup>7</sup>

#### Conclusion

We wish to again thank Chairman LaHood and Ranking Member Davis for hosting this hearing, for convening an excellent panel of expert witnesses, and for their attention to and support of the children and families involved with the child welfare system. We stand ready and eager to work with the Subcommittee in ensuring that federal child welfare programs serve our nation's families, youth and children well.

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<sup>7</sup> Transform Child Welfare through Support for the Workforce. Child Welfare League of America. Retrieved from: [https://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CWLA\\_PolicyBrief\\_WorkforceR3.pdf](https://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CWLA_PolicyBrief_WorkforceR3.pdf)



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January 31, 2024

The Honorable Darin LaHood, Chairman  
 The Honorable Danny Davis, Ranking Member

Work and Welfare Subcommittee  
 House Committee on Ways and Means  
 United States House of Representatives  
 1139 Longworth House Office Building  
 Washington D.C. 20515

**Re: Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**

Dear Chairman LaHood and Ranking Member Davis,

Family Equality is pleased to submit written comment for the January 16th, 2024 Work and Family Support Subcommittee Hearing on “Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.” We thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to offer our comments into the record on how to strengthen supports and services for youth aging out of the foster care system.

Family Equality advocates for LGBTQI+<sup>1</sup> families and those who wish to form them. We are a community of parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren that reaches across the U.S. For more than forty years, we have raised our voices in support of fairness for all families. Family Equality also supports LGBTQI+ youth, including foster youth seeking family formation.

Family Equality convenes and co-chairs the Every Child Deserves a Family Campaign, a nationwide campaign that is composed of over 700 faith, child welfare, civil rights, and allied organizations and individuals who subscribe to the following beliefs and strive to improve the child welfare system by advocating for their implementation: (1) All child welfare decisions should be made in the best interests of the child; (2) All children and youth deserve a stable, loving, forever family; (3) Taxpayer-funded adoption and foster care service providers should not discriminate against youth, including LGBTQI+ youth in need of homes, or qualified LGBTQI+ potential parents or guardians; and (4) Marginalized youth in the child welfare system, including LGBTQI+ youth and youth of color, deserve culturally competent, safe, and supportive care.

<sup>1</sup> LGBTQI+ means lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex. In this comment LGBTQI+ is used unless research cited uses another abbreviation or where research focuses on a subset within the LGBTQI+ population.



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### Overview

We commend the committee's dedication to supporting runaway and homeless youth as well as children in the child welfare system. The primary goal of the child welfare system is to ensure the best interests of children are served through promoting their safety, permanency, and general well-being. Unfortunately, every year nearly 20,000 youth age out of foster care without a permanent placement.<sup>2</sup> When developing policies to support youth in care and those who age out, we urge the committee to consider the needs of the 1 in 3 youth in foster care who identify as LGBTQ+.<sup>3</sup> Young people who identify as LGBTQI+ are overrepresented in the foster care system and experience frequent discrimination which negatively impacts their opportunity to secure permanency and build life-long connections. The goal of the child welfare system is to achieve permanency and stability for *all* youth, but that goal cannot be achieved without taking steps to protect and support LGBTQI+ youth.

### As set forth more fully below, recommendations for supporting and improving outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth in child welfare include:

- I. Preventing discrimination against LGBTQI+ youth to promote placement stability and improve outcomes.
- II. Prevent discrimination against prospective foster and adoptive parents, kin, and families of origin.
- III. Fund technical assistance, service delivery, and training to improve outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth.
- IV. Collect sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression data in child welfare.
- V. Engage LGBTQI+ youth with lived experience when developing and implementing policy and practice changes.
- VI. Support passage of the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., Admin. for Children & Families, Admin. on Children, Youth & Families, Children's Bureau, *The AFCARS Report*, No. 29 (Nov. 1, 2022), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/afcars-report-29>

<sup>3</sup> Laura Baams, Bianca D.M. Wilson, & Stephen T. Russell, *LGBTQ Youth in Unstable Housing and Foster Care*, 143(3): e20174211 Pediatrics (2019), available at: <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2019/02/07/peds.2017-4211.full.pdf>; Megan Martin, Leann Down, & Rosalyn Eney, *Out of the Shadows: Supporting LGBTQ youth in Child Welfare Through Cross-System Collaboration*, Center for the Study of Social Policy (2016), available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/out-of-the-shadows/>; Theo G. M. Sandfort, *Experiences and Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth in Foster Care in New York City: Disproportionality and Disparities*, Administration for Children's Services (2020), available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/about/2020/WellBeingStudyLGBTQ.pdf>; Marlene Matarese, Angela Weeks, Elizabeth Greeno, & Paige Hammond, *The Cuyahoga youth Count: A Report on LGBTQ+ Youth Experience in Foster Care*, The Institute for Innovation and Implementation (2021), available at: <https://theinstitute.umaryland.edu/media/ssw/institute/Cuyahoga-Youth-Count.6.8.1.pdf>



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**I. Preventing discrimination will promote placement stability and improve outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth in care.**

Despite the constitutional right that all children in foster care be provided a safe and appropriate placement, LGBTQI+ youth frequently experience discrimination, mistreatment, and denials of services based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. This discrimination impacts youth's ability to achieve permanency and build connections crucial to supporting them when they age out of care. The overrepresentation of LGBTQI+ youth in child welfare is in part a result of the discrimination they may face when disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity to family members. A 2019 study found that once LGBTQ+ youth disclose their identities, they can face verbal and physical harassment which can result in entering the child welfare system or homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

Once in foster care discrimination continues and can take many forms, compounding trauma that youth have already experienced. LGBTQ+ youth report twice the rate of mistreatment as their non-LGBTQ counterparts and are more likely to experience victimization and abuse by social work professionals and foster and adoptive parents.<sup>5</sup> Child welfare agencies may refuse to recognize a child's gender identity, require them to attend classes that denigrate being LGBTQI+, or place youth with a family who discriminates against their LGBTQI+ identity. A New York City study of LGBTQ youth in foster care found that 78% of LGBTQ+ youth were removed or ran away from their foster care placement as a result of hostility toward their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>6</sup> 56% of LGBTQ youth interviewed spent time living on the streets because they felt "safer" there than they did living in their group or foster home.<sup>7</sup> Barring discrimination against youth in child welfare based on their sexual orientation and gender identity is essential to supporting youth, improving placement stability and reducing the number of LGBTQI+ youth who age out of care.

Discrimination from caseworkers is also commonplace. The same New York City survey found LGBTQ+ youth were less satisfied with their current placement and more likely to say they experience little to no control over their lives in care. LGBTQ+ youth reported hearing staff or other people refer to them as "hard to place."<sup>8</sup> A Cuyahoga County, Ohio study of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care found that young people who did not report their LGBTQ+ identity to their social worker reported fears of "how their social worker may react" and "concerns about losing their placement."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Baams, *LGBTQ Youth in Unstable Housing and Foster Care*, *supra* 3

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Randi Feinstein, Andrea Greenblatt, Lauren Hass, Sally Kohn & Julianne Rana. *Justice for All? A Report on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Youth in the New York Juvenile Justice System* (2001)

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Sandfort, *Experiences and Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth in Foster Care in New York City*, *supra* 3

<sup>9</sup> Marlene Matarese, Angela Weeks, Elizabeth Greeno, & Paige Hammond, *The Cuyahoga youth Count: A Report on LGBTQ+ Youth Experience in Foster Care*, *supra* 3





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LGBTQ+ youth have lower rates of placements in family-like settings, higher rates of placement instability reflected in multiple placements, and higher rates of hospitalization for emotional reasons.<sup>10</sup> Discrimination against LGBTQI+ youth leads to “poorer functional outcomes” including being overrepresented in congregate care and more likely to exit care without permanent placements and into homelessness than their non-LGBTQI+ peers.<sup>11</sup> Preventing discrimination is essential to reducing the harm that LGBTQI+ youth experience in the child welfare system and ensuring LGBTQI+ youth are able to achieve permanency and build connections critical to supporting them as they age out of the system.

## **II. Prevent Discrimination Against Prospective LGBTQI+ Parents, Kin, and Families of Origin.**

With passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act, title IV-E funding can be used for prevention-services for children at risk of entering foster care. These services are focused on preventing the removal of children from home and when remaining at home is not possible, supporting placement with kin. A summary of research on kinship care by ChildFocus found that “children experience better outcomes with kin across three major domains: improved placement stability, higher levels of permanency, and decreased behavior problems.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, refusing placements with kin based on religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other non-merit related reasons deprives children of these improved outcomes.

Despite this, LGBTQI+ families of origin continue to experience discrimination, including LGBTQI+ individuals who are looking to take in kin – impacting reunification and placement stability for youth in care. One study found that Black lesbian and bisexual mothers were four times more likely to lose custody of their children in child welfare proceedings than their non-LGB counterparts.<sup>13</sup> There are also numerous stories of LGBTQI+ kin who have been denied kinship care placements due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>14</sup>

Foster and adoption agencies also discriminate against and turn away LGBTQI+ and religious minority foster and adoptive parents for non-merit reasons which reduces the number of available placements and harms all children in care. A newly released study conducted by Gallup and Kidsave found that LGBT individuals are significantly more likely to consider fostering and

<sup>10</sup> Baams, *LGBTQ Youth in Unstable Housing and Foster Care*, *supra* 3

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> Child Focus, *Children in Kinship Care Experience Improved Placement Stability, Higher Levels of Permanency, and Decreased Behavioral Problems: Findings from the Literature*, Child Focus, available at: [http://grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/4-%20Kinship%20Outcomes%20Review%20Handout\\_1.pdf](http://grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/4-%20Kinship%20Outcomes%20Review%20Handout_1.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Nancy D. Polikoff, *Neglected Lesbian Mothers*, 52 Fam. L. Q. 87, 90 (2018), available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3407307](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3407307)

<sup>14</sup> See Every Child Deserves a Family, *Adoption & Foster Care Stories*, available at <https://everychilddeservesafamily.com/stories>.



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adopting than non-LGBT individuals (37% vs 23%). The study also found more than a third of LGBT individuals reported that fear of discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity is a major barrier to fostering and adopting.<sup>15</sup> LGBTQ parents are more likely to foster and adopt children with historically lower placement rates, including older children, large sibling sets, and children with special needs.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, fear of discrimination prevents LGBTQI+ individuals from opening their homes to youth. By preventing discrimination, child welfare agencies can ensure the pool of potential homes is maximized - opening more family like placements for all youth, including older youth and LGBTQI+ youth. Only with a focus on parents and kin, in addition to foster care, will child welfare practices reduce over-representation and disproportionately negative permanency outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth in care.

### **III. Technical Assistance, Service Delivery, and Training to Improve Outcomes for LGBTQI+ Youth.**

To ensure the system promotes the best outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth and is equipped to adequately support LGBTQI+ youth who age out of care, agencies and individuals must receive culturally inclusive and affirming training. Policies, procedures, and practices need to reflect culturally inclusive care, and communities need to be supported in connecting and engaging youth in healthy, normal child and adolescent activities.

It is essential that nondiscrimination protections are implemented in combination with technical assistance, service delivery, and training on the specific needs of LGBTQI+ youth for child welfare agencies, workers, and prospective foster and adoptive parents. Research shows that LGBTQI+ youth who are accepted and supported have better outcomes than those youth who lack support.<sup>17</sup> Supportive environments, including family, caregivers, and child welfare environments, that acknowledge and affirm youth's sexual orientation and gender identity, have a positive impact on the long-term health and well-being of LGBTQI+ youth.<sup>18</sup>

When possible, training and technical assistance should be used to help reunify youth with families of origin, utilizing models that engage families, reduce rejecting behaviors of parents and caregivers, and improve outcomes. Training and technical assistance should also be used to train

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Fioroni and Andrea Malek Ash, *Fear of Discrimination Deters LGBT Americans From Fostering* (2024), available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/548492/fear-discrimination-deters-lgbt-americans-fostering.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> D.M. Brodzinski & Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, *Expanding Resources for Children III: Research-Based Best Practices in Adoption by Gays and Lesbians*, EVAN B. DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE (2011), available at: [https://www.adoptioninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2011\\_10\\_Expanding\\_Resources\\_BestPractices.pdf](https://www.adoptioninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2011_10_Expanding_Resources_BestPractices.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Child Welfare League of America et al., *Recommended Practices: To Promote the Safety and Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth and Youth at Risk of or Living with HIV in Child Welfare Settings* (2012), available at <https://legacy.lamdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/recommended-practices-youth.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "Moving Beyond Change Efforts: Evidence and Action to Support and Affirm LGBTQI+ Youth," SAMHSA Publication No. PEP22-03-12-001, 2023. Available at: <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep22-03-12-001.pdf>



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caseworkers, child welfare staff members, and prospective foster and adoptive parents to ensure they are able to support the specific needs of LGBTQI+ youth. Professional standards of culturally competent services include: positive youth development programs; LGBTQI+ affirming preventive services; foster care services focused on permanency; safe foster placements where an LGBTQI+ youth's sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are respected; referrals to LGBTQI+ competent physical and mental health care providers.<sup>19</sup> Access to LGBTQI+ affirming mentors and transitional services that help establish independent life skills are also essential.<sup>20</sup> CWLA reported that LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system who receive little or no support face "poor prospects of successfully transitioning to adult living and face elevated health and behavioral risks compared to their non-LGBTQ peers."<sup>21</sup>

#### **IV. Collect Data on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression.**

Safe and confidential data collection on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) is critical to understanding and addressing the needs of LGBTQI+ youth in foster care as well as improving services to reduce the number of youth who age out of care. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) allows researchers to see widespread trends in the child welfare system and formulate more specific research study options and targeted interventions. A lack of nationwide SOGIE data in AFCARS leaves states limited in their ability to improve care and outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth. By collecting data on LGBTQI+ youth in care, agencies can implement effective interventions that could reduce instability, minimize stays in group homes, hospitals, and juvenile justice facilities, and improve permanency in family home settings.

Additionally, SOGIE data for prospective foster and adoptive parents could provide agencies with targeted training and help them recruit LGBTQI+ resource families. If agencies have knowledge of LGBTQI+ resource families, it will help caseworkers make better informed decisions about placements and reduce the possibility of placements that pose a safety risk and risk of placement disruption.

#### **V. Engage LGBTQI+ Youth with Lived Experience in Developing and Implementing Policy and Practice Changes.**

We applaud the committee for including lived experienced voices in the hearing and recognize your commitment to engaging youth who have direct involvement in the system. We urge Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to encourage and support states and jurisdictions in developing and implementing a youth engagement plan as they address better

<sup>19</sup> Child Welfare League of America *et al*, *supra* 17

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*



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supporting LGBTQI+ youth in care and those aging out of care, ranging from analysis of current policies and procedures, development of new policies and training, resolution of grievances and evaluation of outcomes.

#### **VI. Support Passage of the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act.**

The John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act would prohibit federally funded child welfare service providers from discriminating against children, families and individuals because of their religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and marital status. The bill would require HHS to provide training to agencies, caseworkers, judges, and attorneys involved in child welfare services to ensure understanding of and compliance with the Act. It also creates a National Resource Center at HHS to promote well-being, safety, permanency, stability, and family placement for LGBTQI+ children involved in child welfare services. Further, it requires utilizing appropriate best practices to collect data on the sexual orientation and gender identity of youth and families in the child welfare system through AFCARS.

Passage of the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act will help to improve outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth in care and the bill's requirements are aligned with the policy recommendations made above. These policies are critical to improving care and achieving permanency for LGBTQI+ youth. As such, we urge the committee to support passage of the bill and ensure that LGBTQI+ youth have access to supportive care and appropriate support systems if they age out.

#### **Conclusion**

Every year far too many youth age out of care. Access to services that are supportive and affirming are essential to LGBTQI+ youth's ability to find permanency and access support systems to help them thrive in care and when they age out. We urge the committee to consider the needs of LGBTQI+ youth and prohibit discrimination, provide training and technical assistance, ensure SOGIE data collection in AFCARS, and pass the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act. For additional information or questions, please contact Laura Brennan, Associate Director of Child Welfare Policy at Family Equality, at [Lbrennan@familyequality.org](mailto:Lbrennan@familyequality.org).



January 31, 2024

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare

Submitted via email to: [WMSubmission@mail.house.gov](mailto:WMSubmission@mail.house.gov)

RE: Testimony Submitted for Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Hearing  
Held on January 17, 2024

Dear Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for your commitment to and interest in supporting youth and young people who have experienced foster care. We applaud the Committee for inviting three former foster youth to serve as key witnesses at the hearing, and for the thoughtful opening statements by Committee leaders that reflect a strong interest in hearing and learning from these young adults whose experiences offer so much insight on what's working and not working. The collective testimony on January 17th elevated critical challenges that youth in foster care face, especially as they transition to adulthood. In addition to outlining the challenges, witnesses provided insight into many of the solutions that can meet the needs of youth and strengthen their family, connections, and resources as they journey to adulthood.

FosterClub is the national network for young people who experience foster care. While foster care provides a critical safety net in our society for children and youth, we know that being in foster care can be a very difficult experience for a young person. FosterClub believes that when young people have the support they need and the opportunity to drive change in their life, they are able to develop into self-determined individuals. We also believe that when the system listens to young people, it develops a better understanding of how best to support them. We know that policies and programs are more effective when informed by those who have experienced their impact. FosterClub is incredibly pleased to see that lived experience witnesses were invited and prioritized in this hearing.

For the past two decades, FosterClub has worked directly with young people in and from foster care to understand the challenges they face while experiencing foster care and transitioning to adulthood. Along with understanding the challenges, we partner with young people to elevate the solutions that will meet their immediate needs and support long-term thriving as they transition to adulthood.

In addition to the solutions raised by witnesses, FosterClub is glad to see a number of recommendations to improve support for current and former foster youth elevated by Committee members during the hearing. Members reflected on the support they received while they were transitioning to adulthood, recalling the importance of relationships in their lives, and conveying support for foster youth having resources, and guidance that all young people need to be successful.

FosterClub submits these recommendations to build upon the solutions raised during the hearing and uplift priorities we consistently hear from our network of young people. We urge the Committee to focus on three

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areas when exploring the opportunities to change how federal law and programs aid youth and young adults who have experienced foster care in their journeys to adulthood.

1. Ensure that every young person has the lifelong connections and family support they need to thrive.
2. Guarantee that young people and their families can access the support they need before entering foster care, while in foster care if such intervention is necessary, and after exiting foster care.
3. Build effective change in child welfare through partnering with young people who have lived through foster care.

### 1. Lifelong Connections and Family Support

Throughout the hearing, witnesses and Members actively emphasized the crucial role of family support and lifelong connections. Annie E. Casey's presented statistics, revealing that over half of older youth age out of foster care without permanent families, underscoring the urgent need for additional attention and resources to address this issue. Investing in family support for young people will proactively mitigate many of the unnecessary hardships they encounter when lacking dependable adults in their lives.

FosterClub and our network of young people have identified three opportunities to build lifelong connections and family support for transition aged youth in foster care for the Committee to consider investment, redesign, and alignment of existing policies and programming.

1. Ensure we can live with our grandparents and relatives when safe to do so.

Data from Annie E. Casey provided a hopeful outlook that more young people are able to stay with or return to their relatives or kin. Congress has taken impactful steps investing in kinship navigator programs through the Family First Prevention Services Act. It's imperative that these investments continue and that barriers preventing kinship caregivers from caring for youth are addressed.

*"I had a large extended family when I was taken into care, so I was frustrated when I was placed and stuck in congregate care settings and non-relative foster homes for years. When I built connections with those family members as an adult, they would say things like 'I wish I would have known - I would have taken you in', and it broke my heart to think about all of the heartache and trauma that could have been avoided if my caseworkers would have asked me about my extended family instead of assuming I didn't have any." — Brittany, alumni of care from Indiana*

**We encourage the Committee to prioritize effective approaches such as peer navigator programs and peer-delivered services which can both serve as support for relatives at the beginning of their journey caring for youth and throughout their care.** These peer support programs can benefit caregivers, as well as young people.

2. Improve Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention

Jordan Otero shared testimony about the incredible care he received from his foster parents, and the impact their continued support and commitment has on his life:

*"My foster parents are some of the greatest foster parents ever. They have been very supportive in my life after foster care. To this day I have maintained a great relationship with them and my foster dad and*

*I talk on the phone every Friday. My foster parents are people I can lean on for advice and support when I need it."*

As Jordan so clearly outlined, when young people are unable to stay with their relatives or kin, foster parents provide the primary day-to-day support for a young person who is in foster care. Committed foster parents who have the resources they need can completely change the experience a young person has while they are in foster care. Recognition of the vital and central intervention that foster parents provide must occur and be matched with renewed and creative efforts to dramatically increase recruitment, resourcing and retention of foster parents. Many states, tribes and jurisdictions are experiencing challenges in foster parent recruitment; Congressman Feenstra highlighted the loss of foster parents that his state, Iowa, is experiencing.

FosterClub encourages the Committee to prioritize support for foster parent recruitment, resourcing and retention. We are pleased to see the recent passage in the House of H.R. 3058, the *Recruiting Families Using Data Act of 2023*. Understanding how states and jurisdictions are engaging foster parents is the first step addressing this issue. We are particularly pleased that plans will need to include direct feedback from young people, foster, adoptive and kinship caregivers. **Along with this feedback, we recommend that states, jurisdictions and tribes be urged to engage with young people in and from foster care to implement the plans, develop the right spectrum of services and support a foster parent needs to be successful, and evaluate progress in recruitment and retention.** This should include the training provided to foster parents and prospective foster parents; training should be reviewed, updated, and delivered in partnership with youth. Jurisdictions should be encouraged to bring together foster and adoptive parent advisory councils with youth advisory boards where opportunities for collaboration arise; this should include engagement preparation on behalf of the agency and for each council.

It's important to also acknowledge that while many foster parents step in as temporary caregivers for a young person while they are in foster care, at times foster parents may decide to play a larger, permanent role in a young person's life. Mr. Kiefer provided an example of what this can look like and the Committee was able to hear from his son Kenny about that impact, as well. Effective investment in foster parents can lead to long-term connections for young people.

### 3. Increase Essential Permanency and Post-Permanency Supports

Permanency is one of the central promises the child welfare system makes to young people. Yet, there has been a decline in permanency rates for older youth in foster care over the last fifteen years. In addition to the data showing such a decline, FosterClub continues to hear from young people about missed opportunities for permanency, lack of support once permanency is achieved, and too little attention to whether young people and families are equipped with the resources to sustain permanency. **We urge the Committee to address this through continuing to encourage robust engagement of young people in their own permanency process, and in directing targeted, effective post-permanency support available to young people and their families - whether permanency is through reunification, kinship, or adoption.**

*"Permanency is essential to a youth feeling like they belong and that they can have a stable future. Without permanency, a lot of youth feel like they are just a leaf caught in the wind and they don't really know which direction they are going in. Permanency can be that anchor that*



*grounds them and shows them that they can have that future.” - Ethan B., spent 5 years in Oregon’s Foster Care System*

FosterClub has specifically received direct feedback from young people that reunification supports and services are not regularly, or sometimes at all, engaging with children and youth during the process along with parents, and this is an opportunity for improvement. In a poll<sup>1</sup> conducted by the National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council, young people reported a large gap in the support they and their families needed to be successful in reunification: 71% of young people said they had received little to no support when returning home. Insufficiently supporting both young people and their parents in the reunification process has significant costs. Only 37% of the young people polled remained at home with no re-entry into care.

*When I was 8, I was removed from my family not because of an unsafe situation, but because the system was unable to offer my family the type of services and concrete supports that truly could have brought stability. After some time in foster care, I was hastily and unsuccessfully reunited with my family. The reunification wasn’t facilitated with meaningful services that could have strengthened my family to function sustainably and even thrive. Had we received supports such as mental health services, child care and supportive housing, my first reunification might have been successful, and I would be writing a very different story. Instead, due to a lack of support for my family, I was placed in care again — this time on Christmas Day at the age of 16 — for the same exact, unaddressed reasons. - David Samuel Hall, Oklahoma<sup>2</sup>*

Young people have also raised the alarm around the need for additional support post-adoption for themselves and their families. Over the past several years, young people have reported a concerning trend that they see within their networks of peers who have experienced foster care -- older youth being “let go” from their adoptive families once they turn 18 or once adoption subsidy payments end. This trend highlights the need for both short and long-term post-adoption supports for young people and their families. Lived experience recommendations for addressing this include supporting states and jurisdictions to “develop their capacities and tools to assess the risk of adopted youth re-entering foster care and connect those who are to prevention services.”<sup>3</sup>

While we have a number of examples from young people on what happens when permanency doesn’t happen, or isn’t supported, we also have examples of what happens when adoption is supported, and both young people and their parents have the resources they need. In the testimony submitted for the record, Gabe reflected on the impact of his foster-then-adoptive parents’ support to himself and his siblings:

*“I found permanency before high school, joining a family that also adopted three biological siblings. For the first time in my life, I felt confident that I had a strong support group to come home to. I was able to let my guard down around my parents and siblings – and didn’t have to worry about if I was correct in opening up or speaking about my anxieties and concerns. My adoptive parents worked diligently to bring together myself and my siblings into one cohesive family unit. They were transparent; took the time to*

<sup>1</sup> Reunification: Supports for a Successful Return Home. National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> [Want to end foster care? Listen to young people who’ve lived it.](#) Medium. 2021.

<sup>3</sup> [A Historic Opportunity to Reform the Child Welfare System: Youth & Alumni Priorities on Preventing Unnecessary Removal of Children from their Families.](#) National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council. 2019.



*discuss questions that myself or my siblings had about growing up in care or worries we had about fitting in with the rest of the family."*

The Administration for Children and Families created a Youth Engagement Team, in partnership with FosterClub, who collaborated on recommendations on how to support permanency and connections with kinship caregivers and relatives, investing in relationships beyond legal permanency, and unique opportunities to support adoption for older youth. The Youth Engagement team consisted of 10 young adults with lived experience in foster care, with varying permanency experiences. While these recommendations are designed for agencies and courts to utilize in improving their practice, we believe the recommendations<sup>4</sup> can provide insight to the Committee on some of the barriers that must be overcome to truly move towards permanency for all young people experiencing foster care.

## 2. Support before, during and after Foster Care

There is an urgent need to examine the continuum of opportunities that are available to support older youth and their families, starting with strengthening youth and their families by preventing entry into foster care when safely possible. If young people must enter care, focusing resources and supports to ensure they receive the best care possible and exit to permanency as swiftly as possible. Once permanency occurs, as outlined above, robust support must be provided to ensure long-term success. In addition, holistic support needs to be provided to those who have aged-out of foster care without permanency, while simultaneously working to make that experience no longer a reality for young people.

FosterClub and our network of young people recommend the Committee focus action in three primary areas to ensure support across the continuum.

1. Support the Child Welfare Workforce: Make sure there are enough child welfare professionals to meet our needs; increase the number of people with lived experience in the workforce.

Providing the right level of support along the continuum of prevention, intervention and post-permanency requires a robust and engaged workforce. This Committee has heard directly from individuals working within the system about improvements that can be made to recruit, equip and retain individuals within the child welfare and prevention workforce. We recommend incentivizing and supporting individuals with lived experience entering the child welfare workforce. Individuals may enter in traditional workforce roles, such as caseworker, supervisor, administrative, or be able to deliver services as a peer navigator or peer support provider.

Increasing and incentivizing individuals with lived experience in entering and remaining in the workforce requires a targeted approach. There are multiple barriers that lived experience individuals encounter in entering the workforce that must be addressed, often at the agency and organizational level, but also can be supported through policies that incentivize and encourage innovative strategies to increase lived experience representation in the workforce. **FosterClub recommends the Committee look for opportunities to incentivize lived experience representation in the child welfare workforce - including but not limited to peer support or as peers delivering services.**

2. Redesign Older Youth Programs

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<sup>4</sup> [Recommendations for Improving Permanency and Well-Being, ACF Youth Engagement Team, 2020.](#)

It is clear from both the data and what young people tell us, that current older youth programs are falling short of supporting all eligible youth to transition successfully to adulthood. The data provided by Annie E. Casey aligns with what FosterClub has heard from both young people and those in states and jurisdictions providing services to those young people. Increased investments during the pandemic provided valuable learnings in how jurisdictions can improve their services and reach more eligible young people with resources that meet their needs.

Far too few eligible young people are accessing services and supports funded by the John H. Chafee Successful Transition to Adulthood Program. **As a starting point, FosterClub recommends the Committee to create specific guidelines for increased, improved and dedicated outreach and notification efforts.** Currently, outreach and notification varies jurisdiction by jurisdiction, and sometimes, county to county, even worker to worker. Consistent, effective outreach and communication to young people is needed to ensure they can access supports that Congress has put into place.

Several effective examples of this outreach and notification exist, often delivered through peers, and need to be incentivized at the federal level in order to increase the number of young people who are aware of and can access services and resources.

Ensuring all eligible young people are aware of and can access support through the Chafee program is a critical step to aligning the federal investment with the current needs of young people. Congress has thoughtfully expanded the eligibility for Chafee services since the program establishment in 1999 - importantly including services for youth at earlier ages, and recognizing the transition to adulthood does not conclude at age 18. As eligibility has expanded, funding levels have remained stagnant which has resulted in only ¼ of eligible youth receiving Chafee services. **FosterClub recommends an increased investment of at least \$100 million per year in the Chafee program as necessary to guarantee more eligible youth can receive the vital resources the program provides.**

Redesigning older youth programming extends beyond the Chafee program and into extended foster care for young people who exited foster care without the permanency the system promises. FosterClub is excited to support the bipartisan bill H.R. 7010 *Increasing Access to Foster Care Through 21 Act* introduced by Congresswoman Chu and Congresswoman Houchin that will incentivize states to support youth beyond the age of 18 utilizing already established federal support and remove barriers young people encounter which currently limit or prohibit their participation in this program.

Witnesses Jordan Otero and Rebekka Behr shared the crucial role driving plays in a teen and young adult's life, and how foster care often places unnecessary barriers in the path of young people who are attempting to obtain a license, car, or necessary insurance/support to legally operate a vehicle. This is particularly important for young people in rural locations, where public transportation is limited or non-existent, and a regular part of adolescent development for young people across America. FosterClub is thrilled to support the bipartisan bill H.R. 1446 *The Foster Youth and Driving Act* introduced by Ranking Member Davis and Congressman Bacon in May of last year.

**FosterClub implores the Committee to consider the bipartisan bills and recommendations outlined above to quickly address some of the needs elevated by young people.**

3. [Integrate Peer Support and Peer-Delivered Services](#)

Integrating peer support and peer delivered services can aid in addressing workforce challenges, and lead to more effective older youth programming. For the purpose of this testimony, FosterClub will focus on the role of peers for young people experiencing foster care, and also recognizes the value that peer support and peer delivered services can have for both parents and kinship caregivers as outlined in a brief FosterClub co-authored with several partners.<sup>5</sup>

Peer Support and peer delivered services can take a number of forms within programs and services to young people including: mentoring, resource navigation, support groups, training, system navigation, advocacy and outreach.<sup>6</sup> During the pandemic, several jurisdictions adopted or increased peer navigation services to connect young people transitioning, or young people who had already transitioned from foster care, to newly available resources and services. An informal review of this work revealed that peer navigators were significantly more effective at connecting with young people and guiding them to existing resources. Beyond pandemic-era services, several jurisdictions currently integrate peer delivered services into their service array, including: Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Indiana; Kentucky; New York; Oklahoma; Texas and Oregon. A report developed for the Colorado Office of the Child's Representative provides further examples of 6 programs peer roles in legal representation teams including: Iowa, Michigan, Wyoming, Pennsylvania, New York and California.<sup>7</sup>

*"I'm beyond thankful to be a peer navigator. This experience has been a huge blessing to my future aspirations and has given me a greater sense of what it is like, working first hand with foster kids and young adults. The knowledge and feeling that what I'm doing is affecting others and I get to see those effects can't be replicated."*  
*- Kortnee, Peer Navigator who spent 10 years in Oregon's foster care system*

**FosterClub strongly recommends the Committee specify that peer support and peer-delivered services are an allowable use of Title IV-B funds, including for youth or families receiving prevention services, foster care or post-permanency services.**

### 3. Partnering with Young People

FosterClub is grateful this Committee has taken significant steps to prioritize hearing directly from young people with lived experience in foster care. This is critical to finding the right solutions to the challenges that young people face, and ensuring they have what they need to thrive in their transition to adulthood. FosterClub and our network of young people have identified two primary ways the Committee can support lived experience engagement in the policies, programs and services this Committee oversees.

#### 1. Support a conduit for lived experience engagement from the local to federal level.

Both Jordan Otero and Rebekka Behr highlighted the crucial opportunities that youth advisory boards and advocacy groups provide young people while they are going through foster care. These advisory boards and advocacy groups connect young people with each other, reducing the isolation of being in foster care, and provide youth the opportunity to utilize their experiences to impact larger system change. Often, state and regional level youth advisory

<sup>5</sup> [Promoting Peer Support in Child Welfare](#). Multiple Authors. 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Peer Advocacy and Support in Child Welfare Legal Representation: A Report for the Colorado Office of the Child's Representative. 2023.

boards are supported in whole or in part through the John H. Chafee program and funding; sometimes, these advocacy groups have independent sources of funding. As you heard directly from both Rebekka and Jordan, and from the written testimony entered into the record by Gabriel Foley, youth advisory boards provided critical connections to resources, a space where young people can connect with fellow peers experiencing similar things, and a platform from which they can participate in collective changemaking.

*“Our motto is: ‘Advocate, Change, and Empower.’ We want all youth to know that whatever your circumstances, you can give back, speak up, and change the system. You no longer need to be silent. We will create the space and opportunity for you to tell us about your experience, and we’re going to do something about it.”*

– Bree Bradley, Communications Officer, Louisiana Elite Advocacy Force

Currently, a version of these advisory boards exists in each of the 50 states and Washington, DC.<sup>8</sup> However, the capacity of these boards varies greatly as do the opportunities for youth to connect with and benefit from these advisory opportunities. These advisory boards have evolved from state and local youth advocacy and represent an important mechanism for program accountability and program improvement. As you heard at the hearing, youth involvement in advisory boards can be empowering and enriching to a young person during their transition to adulthood. Each young person who experiences foster care should have the opportunity to connect with or participate in a local youth advisory board.

To this end, we recommend the Committee build on this emerging best practice by making it a requirement for states to support a youth advisory board(s) and specify key characteristics to guide agencies in implementation. These include: 1) design or re-design board structure and scope in partnership with young people, 2) establishing clear and regular opportunities for the board to actively contribute to policy, program and practice design, delivery and evaluation - including interfacing with the child welfare agency director on quarterly basis 3) plan for and report on the engagement of multiple young people with varying experiences in foster care, represent multiple geographical locations and that are closely representative of the foster care population 4) capacity building for state agency staff who will engage and support the youth advisory board(s), and 5) a model or benchmark that should encompass more than just compensation; it should also demonstrate alignment with standards informed by lived experiences, particularly for youth advisory boards. This ensures that the framework not only meets financial considerations but also resonates with the real world experiences and needs of young people serving on these boards. Finally, the Committee should invest new, dedicated funds to support agencies in implementing advisory boards.

2. Encourage a full spectrum of lived experience engagement from the individual to the system level.

Over the past several years, Congress set new expectations that individual youth should be involved in and empowered to guide decisions about their life in foster care. . This includes requirements enacted in 2014 through the Preventing Sex Trafficking & Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113-183) that young people receive a copy of their rights, engage in their permanency

<sup>8</sup> A Critical Analysis of Foster Youth Advisory Boards in the United States. Forenza, B. & Happonen, R. Child Youth Care Forum (2016) 45:107–121

or transition plan, or receive copies of the identifying documents before exiting foster care. FosterClub applauds these efforts and understands from our network of young people that implementation is uneven and lacking, meaning that there is more work to be done in this space. There is a clear role for increased oversight and accountability.

There are a number of opportunities for this Committee to encourage, support and incentivize continued engagement of young people in their own time in foster care and in necessary system improvement efforts. First, FosterClub hears too often from young people that although federal requirements exist, such as those outlined above, young people are not receiving the information or support to engage. **We ask the Committee to increase accountability, beginning with new requests to HHS for a report to the Committee and a related briefing that outlines how states, jurisdictions and tribes are complying with the following federal requirements, and how HHS is proactively providing guidance and technical assistance to agencies. In addition, HHS should report to the Committee if/how these requirements are measured in any way during Round 4 of the CFSR process that is underway: notification of rights, engagement in permanency planning, engagement in transition planning and receipt of vital documents.**

In addition to understanding the implementation and effectiveness of existing federal requirements, FosterClub would like to underscore the importance of engagement with individuals and groups with lived experience throughout each of the recommendations outlined above.

To summarize, the three clear priorities we are asking the Committee to attend to are as follows:

1. Ensure that every young person has the lifelong connections and family support they need to thrive.
  - a. We encourage the Committee to prioritize effective approaches such as peer navigator programs and peer-delivered services which can both serve as support for relatives at the beginning of their journey caring for youth and throughout their care.
  - b. FosterClub recommends that states, jurisdictions and tribes be urged to engage with young people in and from foster care to implement the plans, develop the right spectrum of services and support a foster parent needs to be successful, and evaluate progress in recruitment and retention.
  - c. We urge the Committee to encourage robust engagement of young people in their own permanency process, and in directing targeted, effective post-permanency support available to young people and their families - whether permanency is through reunification, kinship, or adoption.
  - d. FosterClub recommends the Committee look for opportunities to incentivize lived experience representation in the child welfare workforce - including but not limited to peer support or as peers delivering services.
2. Guarantee that young people and their families can access the support they need before entering foster care, while in foster care if such intervention is necessary, and after exiting foster care.
  - a. As a starting point, FosterClub recommends the Committee to create specific guidelines for increased, improved and dedicated outreach and notification efforts.
  - b. FosterClub recommends an increased investment of at least \$100 million per year in the Chafee program is necessary to guarantee more eligible youth can receive the vital resources the program provides.
  - c. FosterClub implores the Committee to consider the bipartisan bills and recommendations outlined above to quickly address some of the needs elevated by young people.

- d. FosterClub strongly recommends the Committee specify that peer support and peer-delivered services are an allowable use of Title IV-B funds, including for youth or families receiving prevention services, foster care or post-permanency services.
- 3. Build effective change through partnering with young people who have lived through foster care.
  - a. We recommend the Committee build on this emerging best practice by making it a requirement for states to support a youth advisory board(s) and specify key characteristics to guide agencies in implementation. This should include the investment of new, dedicated funds.
  - b. We ask the Committee to increase accountability, beginning with new requests to HHS for a report to the Committee and a related briefing that outlines how states, jurisdictions and tribes are complying with the federal requirements.

Each of these priorities are interconnected and we encourage the Committee to consider how to make advancements in each of the three areas, in order to more fully support youth in foster care as they embark on their journeys into adulthood. FosterClub is pleased to share these priorities with the Committee and looks forward to being an ongoing resource as the Committee determines the opportunities to increase support for young people in and from foster care.

If you would like to discuss further, please contact Celeste Bodner, FosterClub, 503-717-1552 or [systemchange@fosterclub.com](mailto:systemchange@fosterclub.com).

Sincerely,



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Executive Director

Yi-Chin Chen, MSW  
Executive Director  
Friends of the Children – Boston

Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee  
on Work and Welfare Pathways to Independence:

Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

January 31, 2024

On behalf of the Friends of the Children national network, comprised of 27 independent chapters working in 36 local communities (rural, mid-sized and urban) in 22 states including partnerships with Sovereign Tribal Nations, I thank Chairman Smith, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the committee's discussion regarding the reauthorization of Title IV-B with a focus on supports for older youth impacted by the foster care system.

At Friends of the Children, we meet children between the ages of 4-6 and invite them and their families to have a paid, professional mentor walk alongside them until they graduate from high school – 12+ years, no matter what. We take mentoring out of the volunteer realm, recognizing that for children and families facing the hardest things in life, having a trained, supervised, paid professional mentor who stays for the long-haul is the key to impacting generational change.

For thirty years, Friends of the Children has been empowering youth and families who have been impacted by the foster care system. Our enrollment process focuses on youth who are highest risk of entering, or who are already involved in the foster care system. Across our network, at least 30% of youth in our program have experienced out-of-home placement and nearly 30% of caregivers have experienced foster care themselves. Our youth and family-led, trauma informed approach supports the health and well-being of children and families together with these goals in mind:

- Promoting safe and well-supported children in families
- Providing hope-inspiring services that mitigate trauma and promote well-being
- Preventing further involvement with the child welfare system

Each of the four witnesses who testified orally (and in the written testimony submitted) on January 17<sup>th</sup> mentioned that connection to a stable caring adult is critical for foster youth who are aging out of the system. Both the young adults who shared their lived experience and the experts who testified spoke to the power of relationships to persevere through hardship and reach personal goals. Our thirty years of experience validates that testimony.

Friends of the Children has developed a strong reputation based on the achievement of proven, measurable outcomes for youth facing the greatest challenges. We don't just achieve strong program outcomes – we celebrate lasting life outcomes for young people. Young adults who experience involvement with the foster care system and who graduate from the program achieve our three long-term outcomes at the same rate as all our program participants – remarkable results considering the national statistics for youth transitioning out of foster care: 83% of youth with Friends graduate high school, while 55% without a Friend graduate high school; 93% of youth with Friends avoid the juvenile

justice system, compared to 74% without Friends avoid the juvenile justice system; 98% of youth with Friends avoid early parenting, while only 74% without a Friend wait to parent until after their teen years; and In addition, while young adults who've experienced foster care are just as likely as their peers to have college aspirations, only 32 to 45 percent pursue higher education after high school. At Friends of the Children, we celebrate the fact that 92% of our program graduates go on to enroll in post-secondary education, serve our country, or become employed in a living wage job.

The Harvard Business School Association of Oregon study on Friends of the Children found that **every \$1 invested in Friends of the Children yields more than \$7 in return to the community in savings.**

While underutilization of funding sources directed toward foster youth was part of the committee's discussion, I'd like to also call the committee's attention to young people living with relatives (kin or kinship placements) who do not qualify for Chafee services because they are not recognized by states as being in a formal foster care. These young people are also often on their own starting at the age of 18. At Friends of the Children – Boston, young people in that situation have been working with their professional mentors on skill-building and goal-setting since kindergarten. In the middle and high school years, professional mentors focus intently on what each young person needs to advance their goals, and the practical things like documentation, housing and what it will take to meet their basic financial needs as they move out on their own. In our experience, adolescent youth actively engage in those activities with mentors because of the many years of trust built over time with our program.

Congress has a tremendous opportunity through reauthorization of Title IV-B to support pathways to independence and improved outcomes for older youth, prevent harmful and costly outcomes, and promote greater well-being so youth and families can thrive. We ask for consideration of the following policy recommendations:

- We encourage the committee to leverage the reauthorization of Title IV-B to specify in the purposes of Title IV-B that funds should focus on where there is the greatest opportunity for impact, i.e., family permanency goals for youth, including preventing the need for foster care by strengthening families, and supporting young people who are at highest risk of foster care entry (including older youth) but who don't qualify for Families First/IV-E funding.
- We also encourage an accountable, outcomes-focused approach to State Title IV-B (Child and Family Services) Plans. Prioritize youth and family voice for purposes of accountability, and consider programs like Friends of the Children, that regularly solicit input from youth and caregivers about what is and isn't working, and whether they'd recommend the program.
- Finally, we encourage the prioritization of investment of IV-B funds in relationship-based interventions that provide highly individualized services and supports to families, in recognition that transactional approaches struggle to effectively meet the needs of young people from a range of communities and backgrounds.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony in support of this critical federal funding that has the potential to create a better future all of us by investing in better outcomes for young people, including those impacted by foster care. Friends of the Children stands ready to assist the committee by providing further information, data, and insights to guide your decisions.



## JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the Subcommittee on Work and Welfare: Thank you for holding this important hearing, Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, on January 17 and for your clear commitment to better supporting older youth who experience foster care.

The Journey to Success campaign is a policy campaign grounded in data and the perspectives of young people who have personally experienced foster care. The goal of the campaign is to advance policy solutions that improve outcomes for all youth and young adults who experience foster care. These young people face a steep climb in their journey to adulthood, but targeted policy improvements can help to ensure they are prepared to thrive in school, work, and life. The recommendations below are based on data, best practice, and the perspectives of young people themselves.

Journey to Success builds on more than 20 years of data and insights from generations of young leaders with personal experience in foster care who have advocated for policy changes to improve outcomes for young people like them. Time and again, Congress has stepped up to champion legislative reforms on behalf of youth in foster care. We commend Congress for these actions and urge continued reforms needed to spur the positive outcomes we all want for youth in foster care. Seminal achievements in federal policy include:

- The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 provided federal support for evidence-based prevention services to help more children and youth remain with their families and prevent foster care whenever safely possible.
- The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 focused on improving family connections and lifelong permanency by expanding the adoption incentive payment program to include legal guardianships. This Act also brought needed oversight to the use of AAPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) as a case plan goal to help limit the number of youth aging out without family permanence.
- The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was a landmark achievement in its focus on improving child and youth outcomes in the areas of health, education, and family. This Act authorized federal support for kinship guardianship and adoption assistance, and provided states an option to extend foster care, guardianship, and adoption assistance beyond age 18 – providing timely support to youth during their transition to adulthood. Fostering Connections also provided the first federal funding for kinship navigator programs, required states to make reasonable efforts to keep siblings in foster care together, and established new kinship notification requirements to promote relative placements.
- The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 established the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program - a dedicated federal program that offers states flexible funds to better support youth in making successful transitions to adulthood with services such as

mentorship, education support, work and life skills, and specified that efforts to find permanent placement should continue concurrently with independent living skills.

Thanks to these reforms, we have seen encouraging progress towards ensuring the well-being of children and youth who experience foster care. However, troubling outcomes for foster youth remain. As you heard at the hearing, the foster care experience for youth is often marked by frequent placement and school changes, and ultimately leaving foster care without being safely reunited with their families or connected to another lifelong family. In fact, about 20,000 young people age out of foster care – a number that has largely unchanged for more than a decade.

Drawing on lessons learned in the field, Journey to Success is optimistic that targeted federal reforms can spur significant program and practice changes that will improve the lives and outcomes for youth who experience foster care. Due to the hardships many foster youth continue to experience, we believe federal action is urgently needed and the committee's Title IV-B reauthorization provides a timely opportunity to enact targeted reforms to achieve important goals: 1) connect young people to lifelong family, 2) reduce the large numbers of youth who age out of foster care each year on their own, and 3) provide help and services to those for whom permanency is not achieved.

Investing in youth and young adults will lead to stronger families and communities, a ready workforce, and a more vibrant economy. It will also help prevent homelessness, poverty, and incarceration in our communities.

#### **Specific Recommendations for Improving Outcomes for Youth Who Experience Foster Care**

##### **1. Strengthening family ties and family permanence and reducing the possibility of youth "aging out" on their own.**

The purpose of foster care is to provide a short-term safety net while attending to the health, behavioral and emotional well-being of children and youth in care. The best outcome for every child in foster care is to return safely home or, when that's not possible, to be connected to a new permanent lifelong family through adoption or guardianship. Why? Because children do best in families and deserve to have the sense of belonging and love that families offer.

Indeed, an expansive body of research reinforces what we know to be true: positive experiences and healthy relationships are critically important to setting young people on a course to success in adulthood. For youth in foster care, supportive relationships with adults are not only critical in navigating the unique challenges associated with foster care; they are cornerstones of successful reunification, adoption, and guardianship – the current pathways to legal permanency. In addition to the clear emotional benefits, on a practical level, families also provide the type of guidance and resources that support educational attainment and job retention, as well as meaningful engagement in civic activities and community.

To ensure that every youth has the opportunity to have meaningful, lifelong relationships with adults who love them, we recommend that Congress make policy reforms to promote family connections before, during and after foster care. Specifically, JTS calls on policymakers to provide an array of support for families involved in child welfare, including biological, kinship, foster and adoptive families.

- Placement matters. Rebalance the important federal-state cost sharing by providing federal financial participation for all family-based foster care placements. Specifically, Congress should de-link Title IV-E foster care funding eligibility that is linked to the defunct 1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC), continuing the reforms made for prevention services under the Family First Prevention Services Act and for adoption assistance enacted through the Fostering Connections Act.
  - Enhance judicial oversight. Courts and judicial officers play key roles in overseeing the case plans of youth and therefore it is important to ensure court personnel are well-trained in their role in reviewing and overseeing cases of youth in foster care to help ensure every effort is made to help foster youth achieve permanency. JTS urges the committee to invest in the Court Improvement Program and specify that youth should be involved to the extent possible in their court proceedings. should adequately support training for judges and court professionals.
  - Incentivize all permanency outcomes. Expand the Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Payments program to include incentive payments to states for permanency outcomes achieved through reunification. All permanency incentive payments should be equal and equitable.
  - Grow best practice. Kinship care is best practice due to the multiple benefits to children and youth. Benefits to children include more stable placements and fewer school changes and increased likelihood of achieving permanency. National data show an overall increase in kinship placements and attention to kin connections. Taking this best practice to scale should be a top priority for policymakers and program administrators. One important and timely way to support this trend is through increased investment in kinship navigator programs.
  - Support and direct resources for peer-to-peer engagement and support through Title IV-B, Chafee, clarifying that IV-E administrative funds can be used for this purpose and by developing a national peer certification protocol that will enable the expansion of peer support programs.
  - Stable family-based placements are linked to permanent families for youth. Require state child welfare agencies to establish a set of core supports for kin and non-kin foster families to increase placement stability, help retain caregivers and improve child well-being and permanency outcomes.
2. **Strengthen and expand the flexibilities of the Chafee program to support the types of strong relationships and access to services proven to support a successful transition to adulthood.**

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood program is a critically important source of support for youth in foster care. Created 25 years ago, it serves children and youth in foster care and those who have aged out between ages 14-21 and supports a wide range of services including educational support, job readiness training, mentoring, life skills training, and wellness services, among other things. Unfortunately, despite tremendous need, fewer than one-quarter of eligible young people receive Chafee services in a given year, and less than half of eligible youth will ever receive a Chafee service during the entire time they are eligible. In addition, Chafee's menu of services does not reflect the areas older youth say they need help with most: mental health, housing, education, employment, transportation, mentoring, and more. The program also doesn't prioritize family connections.

JTS calls on Congress to invest in and redesign the Chafee program by:

- Help state agencies improve their programming and reach. Increasing the investment in the Chafee program by at least \$100 million per year, so that states and communities can provide more services that meet the needs of young people.
  - Provide access to and continuity of supportive services to youth during their transitional years to young adulthood. Make eligibility requirements more flexible, so that young people up to age 26 can access Chafee services, providing continuity and support that is reflective of their development and consistent with other services such as Education and Training Vouchers and Medicaid health insurance.
  - Update the specified array of youth services to better match those that young people say they need, including peer-delivered services, transportation, and navigation to other existing services such as community-based housing, mental health, parenting support, and workforce readiness.
  - Improve the effectiveness of the Chafee program by establishing new expectations for agencies to work more closely with youth such as by requiring state agencies to establish and support youth advisory boards where youth and young adults can collaborate to ensure quality programming supports positive outcomes.
  - Improve communication to youth about available services. Incentivize agencies to develop outreach and communications strategies to raise awareness about available services among foster youth and former foster youth to ensure they can access services.
  - Promote permanency throughout youth and young adult years. Make healing and family connections a stated priority focus of the Chafee program to promote services and programming for eligible youth that will help eliminate "aging out" as an acceptable outcome.
- 3. Improve how child welfare promotes the health, healing, and well-being of children and youth in foster care.**

Youth and young adults in foster care often face significant difficulties due to health and mental health issues rooted in their history of childhood trauma. In addition, the experience of entering foster itself is inherently traumatic even when it is necessary for a child's safety. The ongoing separation, losses, and uncertainty that are endemic to foster care often compound a

child's trauma. The American Academy of Pediatrics finds that nearly 80 percent of children and adolescents entering foster care have one or more serious physical or mental health needs stemming from childhood trauma, and that one third of children and youth in foster care have a chronic medical condition. A substantial body of evidence exists showing that psychotropic medications are overused in lieu of more appropriate and effective treatments, such as peer support and other non-clinical interventions. Finally, young people have widely reported that not only do they face challenges accessing the mental health services currently available, but they are not provided a full array of interventions that can help address trauma, such as non-clinical therapies (i.e. art therapy, movement and non-traditional healing practices.)

The Health Oversight and Coordination Plans, which have been a Title IV-B requirement since 2008, fall short of providing the timely access and coordination of services that are critical to meeting the complex health and mental health needs of many youth in foster care, not allowing them the opportunity to heal and address issues that are likely to impact their future. We recommend the following reforms to make these plans more effective:

- Leverage the existing plan requirements to increase much-needed attention on youth mental health. Expand the scope of these plans to better account for the trauma histories of children and youth in foster care and better address their health and mental health needs.
  - Expand the scope of these plans by renaming them “Health and Mental Health Oversight and Coordination Plans” and specifying coordination with both Medicaid and behavioral health agencies in the development and implementation of these plans.
  - Require that the plan include an inventory of the service array and have in place key components of a comprehensive children's mental health system, including prevention, early intervention, and treatment, including the use of peer specialists; training of caseworkers on connecting young people with therapeutic supports; therapeutic supports and community-based resources that are appropriate for the needs of youth (including meaningful extracurricular activities and wellness support); processes to address privacy concerns; and planning for continuity of care.
  - Add a requirement that the plan describe how the state agency actively consults with and involves youth and young adults with foster care experience in the development of the plan.
- Help more foster youth get the mental health support they need. Improve the array of (and access to) mental health services that are available to meet the complex needs of children and youth in foster care, including peer support and non-clinical services that help build and strengthen family, peer, and community connections.
  - Create innovation grants through a new program, modeled on the Regional Partnership Grants within Title IV-B, to spur community-based innovation and implementation of effective, engaging, varied mental health treatments and supports – including culturally responsive services – for children, youth and

young adults in foster care in order to find approaches that allow them to heal and pursue their goals.

- Provide targeted resources to states effectively implement the activities and goals set forth in the plans – allowing them to live up to their potential to improve the array of, and access to, important services that promote their well-being.

In closing, thank you for your leadership and for holding an important hearing to examine ways to improve outcomes for foster youth.

For more information about these recommendations, please see additional policy analysis and research on the campaign's website ([www.journeytosuccess.org](http://www.journeytosuccess.org)) or reach out to the campaign.

Thank you,  
Hope Cooper  
Journey to Success  
[hope@journeytosuccess.org](mailto:hope@journeytosuccess.org)



BRANDON T. NICHOLS  
Director

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The County of Los Angeles Statement for the Record  
Submitted to the Committee on Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
Hearing on:  
"Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth  
Aging out of Foster Care"  
January 17, 2024

Thank you, Chairman LaHood and Ranking Member Davis, and members of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare for holding such an important hearing on supporting youth aging out of foster care.

I am Brandon Nichols, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Los Angeles County (the County) has one of the largest county-governed child protective services agencies in the country and is responsible for the safety of over two million children. DCFS serves a diverse population of children and families, including a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) clients, and children with complex needs, among others. It is a core value of DCFS that children should live safely with their families when possible.

When children cannot safely remain in their homes, children and their families must receive trauma-informed, person-centered services from caseworkers, behavioral health providers, community-based organizations, and other professionals who have the expertise, and the bandwidth, to address each family's unique needs. Our children and families deserve to have equitable access to services, which can be challenging in a large and geographically varied county.

On behalf of DCFS, I am pleased to highlight several critical themes that emerged from the Subcommittee hearing and provide recommendations to advance key improvements for older youth.

Currently, there are over 391,000 children and youth in the foster care system. Approximately 20,000 older youth are "emancipated" from care every year. Many of these older youth experience homelessness, poverty, substance use disorders,

*"To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service"*

and incarceration. We can and we should provide resources and support to these youth to enable them to successfully transition into adulthood. As heard by the Subcommittee, mentoring programs for foster youth may be a key component to improving outcomes for this population. Los Angeles County is supportive of efforts to enhance the opportunities for youth in foster care to have stable relationships with adults who will have a positive and life-changing impact as their mentor.

It was significant that the Subcommittee prioritized hearing from youth with lived experience in the child welfare system. Their voices are critical to informing sound public policy. It was also important for the Subcommittee to hear from these youth leaders about the need to increase funding for and access to the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (the Chafee program).

The Subcommittee heard testimony from youth with lived experience on the importance of having the ability to get a driver's license and have access to a car. Obtaining a driver's license is a key milestone for youth. Research has shown that a driver's license improves educational attainment and job retention.

Youth with lived experience have testified that a driver's license made securing and getting to a job possible and enhanced their ability to connect with siblings and other kin.

Unfortunately, this critical pathway to success and family connection is not readily available to many eligible youth in foster care.

That is why the County is pleased to support the Foster Youth and Driving Act (H.R. 1446/S. 699) introduced by Representatives Danny Davis (D-IL), Don Bacon (R-NE), and Senators Maggie Hassan (D-NH) and Todd Young (R-IN). The Foster Youth and Driving Act would provide critical resources and support to improve access to a driver's license for eligible youth in foster care.

In discussing the need for improved access to a driver's license, it was illuminating that one of the youth with lived experience, who resided in a state with a very progressive driver's license program, testified that her ability to get a driver's license was compromised by her lack of a Social Security card.

Current federal law requires states to provide documentation such as driver's licenses, birth certificates or Social Security cards for youth emancipating from care.

California requires all child welfare agencies to provide all children and youth in foster care with a Social Security card.

DCFS has also encountered challenges in obtaining Social Security cards for foster youth due to differences in the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) regional enforcement of the agency's document requirement policies. For example, different regional SSA offices appear to be using inconsistent application approval procedures, including for what they consider "acceptable documents" for social



security card requests for children and foster youth. This problem is especially acute in Los Angeles County, which has 16 regional SSA offices that serve residents of the County.

Obtaining a Social Security card for foster youth provides them with an essential resource they need to attain educational advancement, secure employment, and stable housing, and further enhance their pathway to independence.

The County welcomes the opportunity to brief Members of the Subcommittee on this issue and would appreciate any support in moving forward to ensure that all children and youth in foster care have the appropriate documentation to succeed.

Finally - as the Subcommittee moves forward on critical reforms to the nation's child welfare system, attention must be directed to addressing the income eligibility threshold for federal support, also known as the "AFDC Lookback." As Members of the Subcommittee know, the income eligibility for federal foster care is linked to the 1996 eligibility for cash welfare known as the "Aid to Families with Dependent Children" (AFDC). AFDC has been eliminated, but the income threshold remains embedded in federal foster care reimbursement.

As a result of the "AFDC Lookback," every year states and counties are required to direct increasing amounts of local dollars to support children and youth placements in foster care. This undermines the critical federal-state balance and reduces the likelihood that states and counties can be in a position to adopt important improvements to child welfare systems.

Congress has acted in the past to eliminate the "AFDC Lookback" for adoption assistance payments and for prevention services authorized under the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA).

The County urges Congress to continue to address the "AFDC Lookback" as a significant feature of child welfare reform.

In conclusion, I wish to again thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee for holding such an important hearing. On behalf of DCFS, I'm pleased to respond to any questions or comments.

Paris Hilton

**Testimony for the U.S. House of Representatives House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**

**January 19, 2024**

Dear Members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

I submit my testimony as a survivor of institutional child abuse, representing the silent voices of hundreds of thousands of children trapped in the nightmare of residential treatment facilities across our nation. An estimated 120,000-200,000 of our nation's most vulnerable youth are pipelined into youth residential programs each year by state child welfare and juvenile justice systems, mental health providers, federal agencies, school districts' individualized education programs, and by parents at a cost of \$23 billion dollars annually.

Today, I share my story to shine a light on the pervasive issue of child abuse, neglect, and deaths in youth residential programs.

For the past two decades, I have carried the weight of a recurring nightmare – a nightmare that became my reality at the age of 16. I was forcibly taken from my home by two strangers, handcuffed, and transported to various facilities, each more horrific than the last – CEDU, Cascade, Ascent Wilderness, and finally, Provo Canyon School. I experienced verbal, mental, physical, and sexual abuse, stripped of my identity and basic human rights.

At these facilities, I experienced physical labor, sleep deprivation, forced medication, and maltreatment. I was subjected to verbal abuse, physical beatings, sexual abuse through frequent gynecological exams in the middle of the night and even strangulation by staff members. The solitary confinement room, a small, blood-stained space without a bathroom, remains a vivid and traumatizing memory.

Communication with the outside world was a luxury denied to us – monitored and censored, rendering us voiceless. The facilities strategically manipulated inspections, concealing the abuse and penalizing staff who failed to create a facade of false happiness. The lack of oversight was a betrayal of the trust placed in these institutions.

While my experience was over 20 years ago, the abusive practices, lack of oversight and transparency remain unaltered. I particularly want to highlight the distressing experiences of foster youth in these facilities. The reports are alarming—mental, physical, and sexual abuse reported by these youth. The long-term trauma, including PTSD, resulting from placements in youth residential programs underscores the urgent need for reform.

In 2021, there were [4,925 foster children](#) under the age of 12 residing in group homes and institutions, with 3,068 of these youth specifically placed in institutions. Unfortunately, the vulnerability of these children was further underscored by the existence of [822 substantiated incidents](#) of child abuse and neglect by staff in group homes and residential facilities during the same year. The data on older foster youth in residential facilities is even higher.

Not only are foster youth experiencing abuse and neglect within these settings, but there have been tragic deaths. [Ja'Ceon Terry](#), a 7-year-old foster youth, died on July 17, 2022 at a Kentucky residential treatment facility called Brooklawn. The state's investigation found that in his final hours of life, Ja'Ceon was "publicly shamed, verbally abused, left in his room alone for nearly six hours and restrained by two staff members until he vomited and lost consciousness." On April 29, 2020, 16 year old [Cornelius Fredericks](#) was physically restrained by seven staff members for over 12 minutes at Lakeside Academy, ultimately leading to his death. Why? Because he threw a sandwich in the cafeteria.

These examples underscore a number of systemic failures that contributed to the death of vulnerable children who had experienced trauma after trauma in their short lives.

Since my documentary premiered, survivors have been sharing their stories, and children in these facilities are directly reaching out for help. We must empower them, listen, and respond accordingly and I believe it is my legacy to ensure no more children experience anything but help and support in these settings. The Stop Institutional Child Abuse Act (SICAA) is the first step towards change.

Since the bill's introduction, we have garnered bipartisan support with over 70 cosponsors in the House and 20 cosponsors in the Senate. Additionally, we have over 50 national organizations that support the legislation. This is not a partisan issue and I believe this widespread support demonstrates the urgency and importance of addressing child abuse in youth residential programs.

I urge the House Ways and Means Committee to support SICAA, prioritize its passage, and end the cycle of abuse that has persisted for generations. The time to act is now, and every child deserves a future free from torture and trauma. Your committee's involvement is crucial in advancing SICAA and ensuring its alignment with broader child welfare goals.

Sincerely,

Paris Hilton



**Center for the  
Study of  
Social Policy**  
Ideas into Action

January 31, 2024

The Honorable Darin LaHood, *Chairman*  
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
Committee on Ways and Means  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Danny K. Davis, *Ranking Member*  
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
Committee on Ways and Means  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Submitted electronically: [WMSubmission@mail.house.gov](mailto:WMSubmission@mail.house.gov)

Chairman LaHood and Ranking Member Davis,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in response to your inquiry regarding strategies to better support youth aging out of foster care as part of the Subcommittee's legislative hearing on *Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*. Young people play an important role in shaping our society and contributing to their families, their communities, and the broader economy. Their ability to fulfill their hopes and aspirations will ultimately determine our collective future. As one youth who was interviewed as part of the CARES community analysis shared, "*I can be something great, no matter what my background [is], no matter what foster care was, because at the end of the day, it's not foster care that defines me.*" Young people deserve opportunities that promote their health and well-being, maximize their power and promise, and support their ability to achieve their goals and dreams. Investments in community-based supports are indispensable to fulfilling this vision. Upstream investments in programs like Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (Title IV-B) provide systems and communities the opportunity and ability to be more responsive to and supportive of youth and their expressed needs while also preventing costly and harmful deeper-end system involvement.

We submit this testimony on behalf of the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and Creating Actionable and Real Solutions (CARES), a CSSP initiative. CSSP is a national, non-partisan policy organization recognized for its leadership in reforming public systems and advancing policies that promote equity and improve the health and well-being of children, youth, and families. CSSP provides direct technical assistance to public child welfare systems and their partners including foster care agencies and community-based organizations. Our work also includes providing technical assistance on improving policy and practice strategies impacting families with young children, adolescents and transition age youth, expectant and parenting youth, and those who identify as LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup>. As a part of this work, CSSP leads the CARES initiative, which is a partnership between CSSP and 27 Youth Ambassadors from Atlanta, GA;

<sup>1</sup> CSSP uses the term LGBTQ+ to be inclusive of all youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. We recognize that youth have diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and this acronym is evolving.

New York City, NY, and Los Angeles, CA, who have all experienced foster care and are navigating their own pathways to independence. The CARES initiative aims to eliminate the systemic challenges that youth, specifically youth of color, face as they transition out of foster care and into community by developing intentional, authentic, and youth-centered policy strategies that dismantle problematic policy and practice and increase investments in policies, community resources, and infrastructure that truly support youth in achieving their goals. As part of this work, we co-created a [\*Policy Agenda for a Nation that Cares for Young Adults\*](#)<sup>2</sup> and conducted a *community analysis*,<sup>3</sup> which included conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews with youth across the country to understand how communities are organized to include, affirm, and support transition aged youth. Our testimony below are informed by this work, the expertise of the CARES Youth Ambassadors, and CSSP's extensive experience working directly with child welfare systems and communities across the country and focuses on 1) the importance of Title IV-B and current structure that promotes flexibility to support youth in their communities and 2) the opportunity for new investments in Title IV-B to promote meaningful connections to caring adults and mental health and well-being for young people. Additionally, we propose a structure to ensure accountability and positive outcomes for older youth.

***Increased investments in Title IV-B are necessary to create a significant difference in the lives of young people transitioning out of foster care.*** Title IV-B is an important source of funding because it offers states and communities flexibility to determine how resources can best be spent to support youth and family needs. Importantly, the program's eligibility requirements allow for spending on programs to support youth *outside* of the child welfare system and therefore without the surveillance that involvement with child welfare entails. However, Title IV-B expenditures, which already represent a small portion (4%) of all federal funds spent by child welfare agencies, have decreased by 14% over the past decade.<sup>4</sup> As a result, state agencies are forced to make difficult choices as they determine which population—children, youth, or families—deserve the greatest support. States should never have to make such tradeoffs. All children, youth, and families deserve the opportunity to have the supports they need to be healthy and thrive. To truly support youth aging out of foster care, Congress must increase the reauthorization amount for Title IV-B so that states can invest in meaningful supports for all children, youth, and families in their communities. Doing so will help achieve the intended goals of the program and prevent the harm and trauma experienced by families due to unnecessary child welfare system involvement.

***Title IV-B must remain flexible to meet the unique and diverse needs of youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care.*** We know that young people across the country lack access to resources in communities that are responsive and meet their unique needs. In interviews with youth conducted through our community analysis, some young people described “service deserts” while others noted that the services that were available in the community were not responsive to their needs and often were not affirming of their identity. To truly be supportive of youth and their families, resources should not simply be “provided.” They must

<sup>2</sup> CARES, an initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2023). A Policy Agenda for a Nation that Cares for Young Adults. Available at: <https://cares4power.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CARES-A-Policy-Agenda-for-a-Nation-That-CARES-for-Young-Adults.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Community Analysis is an investigative approach adapted from the Institutional Analysis methodology, which was developed by Ellen Pence and CSSP, to examine and seek solutions to the organizational and structural dynamics that produce poor outcomes for particular populations of children, youth, and families served by social service agencies and community process. For more information, please see: Center for the Study of Social Policy (July 2023). Understanding how transition age youth experience their communities: A Community Analysis by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CARES-Understanding-How-Transition-Age-Youth-Experience-their-Communities-1.pdf> and Pence, Ellen. (2020.) “The Institutional Analysis: Matching what institutions do with what people need,” in The Palgrave Handbook of Institutional Ethnography (pp. 329-356), Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-5422-1\\_18](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-5422-1_18).

<sup>4</sup> Child Trends. (2023). Child Welfare Financing Survey SFY 2020: Title IV-B. Available at: [ChildWelfareFinancingSFY2020\\_TitleIV-B.pdf](https://childwelfarefinancing.org/SFY2020_TitleIV-B.pdf) ([childtrends.org](https://childtrends.org))

reflect the actual needs of young people, as they themselves define them; support their existing strengths; and respect the diversity of youth in the community. The flexibility of Title IV-B allows for programs to be responsive to this need by allowing states and communities to determine how dollars are spent, and for example, to incorporate relationship building as a core component of any program – regardless of whether a program is focused specifically on relationship building (e.g. mentoring programs) or a service (e.g. behavioral health, financial literacy etc.). As Congress works to identify strategies to meaningfully support youth transitioning out of foster care, including through the reauthorization of Title IV-B, it is important to maximize its impact by: (1) continuing to ensure the flexibility of Title IV-B including through not restricting funding to specific types of programs (e.g. mental health, substance use, etc.) that meet specific criteria (e.g. “evidence-based” according to a Clearinghouse); (2) promoting approaches that support children, youth, and families of color in their community; and (3) ensuring services are provided by organizations embedded in and trusted by the community.

***Title IV-B must continue to support investments in community-based organizations who support children, youth, and families outside of the child welfare system.*** The child welfare system is not designed to effectively serve as a “parent” to youth, and young people consistently affirm their desire to be out of the system, and no longer be defined by the system or connected to the harms they experienced while in foster care. As one CARES Youth Ambassador from Los Angeles explains, *“the goal of extended foster care is to help prepare us for the transition to living independently. We do not want to be in foster care forever. We need resources in our communities to help us once we get there.”* The surveillance and paternalistic roots of the child welfare system do not support youth success. CARES Youth Ambassadors and CSSP strongly encourage Congress to require Title IV-B expenditures be directed to support community-based organizations that are responsive to the needs of young people and identified in partnership with youth. Doing so will promote the effectiveness of the programs and ensure greater fit between services and the expressed needs of young people.

***Youth deserve connections to consistent and caring adults, based in the community, who are knowledgeable about and responsive to their needs.*** With support from invested adults, reliable access to quality resources, and help developing life skills, young people can successfully navigate this transition and establish themselves as engaged adults pursuing their goals and ready to contribute to their communities.<sup>5</sup> For older youth aging out of foster care, many have had these relationships in their life weakened or severed by child protective services and yet these connections to community, including relationships with supportive and consistent adults, are critical to ensuring that they can access supports that are responsive to their needs and identities. The CARES community analysis provides insights into how young people define community—as relationships with peers, family, and other supportive adults, and not based on where they live (e.g., geographic boundaries).<sup>6</sup> In the CARES community analysis young people describe community in two key ways; the first, as being in caring relationships, having a sense of belonging, and a circle of friends and relatives who “have my back;” and the second, as connection to supportive adults who could help them navigate community resources. Young people also reported that services were often hard to access and spoke about difficulties in building relationships in their communities—especially when it came to supportive adults who could help them find community resources to meet their basic needs. As a CARES Youth Ambassador in Los Angeles explains, *“people who get to take in these resources, they know about them. They're told about them because these are the people that are within the circle of knowing. So, they*

<sup>5</sup> Harper Browne, C., Notkin, S., Schneider-Muñoz, A., Zimmerman, F. (2015). Youth thrive: A framework to help adolescents overcome trauma and thrive. Journal of Child and Youth Care Work. Available at: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Youth-Thrive-A-Framework-to-Help-Adolescents-Overcome-Trauma-and-Thrive.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. (July 2023). Understanding how transition age youth experience their communities: A Community Analysis by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CARES-Understanding-How-Transition-Age-Youth-Experience-their-Communities-1.pdf>



*expose people [to what's out there]. If they don't know... no one's gonna look... if they don't think it exists."* And a CARES Youth Ambassador in Atlanta adds, *"because being so young, we really don't know what we're doing, and there's not a lot of support behind us, even though people will say, yeah, we support you. We can help you do this. But you just get fed up to a certain point."*

We owe young people aging out of foster care the support that all youth need as they navigate the world, including connections to supportive adults who can help them negotiate systems and resources in their community. We encourage Congress to authorize increased funding through Title IV-B to support the creation of a new federal program to ensure that community-based navigators are available to provide guidance to young people aging out of foster care as they plan for their future, and traverse a range of systems, services, and supports. This program is critical to supporting young people aging out of foster care and on their path to independence. Young people who have aged out of foster care are accustomed to abrupt and arbitrary cliffs when it comes to supports, as many programs are cut off at age 18, others at 21, 23, or 26. They are used to relationships ending too—with providers, with case workers, with foster parents, and with systems. These community-based navigators should not repeat the pattern of abrupt cut-offs young people experience time and time again, and instead, remain connected with a young person for a period of up to five years after they leave foster care. During this time, community-based navigators can establish trusting and meaningful relationships with young people, helping them navigate the world, and supporting them as they establish autonomy and begin to make decisions and choices that are right for them. Supporting progressive independence and community relationship building should be held as core to this work and in this way, these navigators will serve as a needed resource, during an important time, and help young people grow into independence and adulthood.

***Youth deserve a comprehensive, expansive array of community-based services that promote and affirm their mental health and well-being.*** Our mental health is deeply connected to every element of our lives. It impacts our overall well-being and our ability to pursue our goals and aspirations. When young people are able to access mental health services and supports that are responsive and affirming and that promote health and healing, they gain a positive sense of identity, efficacy, and well-being; build resilience; and thrive.<sup>7</sup> Young people who have the mental health supports they need are able to succeed in school, at work, and throughout life.<sup>8</sup> However too often young people aging out of foster care struggle with their mental health and are unable to find the resources they need. Services need to be designed to meet the needs of youth who seek mental health services, both in clinical settings, and also in non-clinical settings that utilize diverse techniques including mindfulness, guided imagery, traditional healers, support group meetings, and movement techniques. Title IV-B funding is critical to supporting the availability of these programs, particularly those provided in non-clinical settings. We urge Congress to increase investments in Title IV-B and direct states to adopt a broad definition of wellness that will promote success for young people in their transition out of foster care.

***Programs must be accountable to older youth.*** Currently, accountability requirements do not center young people. To ensure that programs funded using Title IV-B achieve the program's intended goals and support older youth on their pathway to independence, it is important to increase accountability to older youth. This includes engaging with and hearing directly from young people in the design, selection, and implementation

<sup>7</sup> National Research Council (US) and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on the Prevention of Mental Disorders and Substance Abuse Among Children, Youth, and Young Adults: Research Advances and Promising Interventions, O'Connell ME, Boat T, Warner KE, editors. (2009). Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US). Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK32775/doi:10.17226/12480>

<sup>8</sup> Strong, K. (November 30, 2022). Don't Overlook Young Adults' Mental Health. Bipartisan Policy Center. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/young-adults-mental-health/>

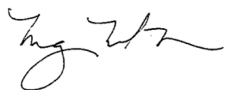
of programs as well as the process of measuring effectiveness and impact. Youth should be engaged to provide feedback on their experiences with programs, and also, the process of analyzing the data to determine how success is measured and understand barriers to success for young people. Further, states should be required to report back to young people about how the data and feedback shared by young people is being used to drive decision-making and program selection and implementation. As a CARES Youth Ambassador from Los Angeles explains, *“we need to and want to know how [the state] is using the information we share. They need to come back and tell us.”* To ensure states meaningfully engage young people in program selection, design, implementation, and evaluation, and to promote transparency and fiscal responsibility, Congress should require all states to establish meaningful engagement strategies with young people and report on how that engagement drives all decision-making at the state level including in the selection and funding of community-based programs.

### ***Conclusion***

Promoting youth well-being and the successful transition of older youth to independence requires a radically different approach that center the voices of diverse youth and creates a and continuum of community-based supports that meet their diverse needs and are offered in spaces they trust. Title IV-B provides a unique opportunity to support these young people by providing funding for states to invest in innovative programming and responsive solutions that are developed by communities and informed by young people. However, to achieve the intended outcomes of the program, Congress must increase Title IV-B funding, including to support a new community-based navigator program, maintain the existing flexibility of the program, and direct states to meaningfully engage and partner with older youth to determine what supports are necessary to promote their successful transition.

Should you have any questions regarding my responses or wish to follow-up with additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [megan.martin@cssp.org](mailto:megan.martin@cssp.org); 202.371.1565.

Sincerely,



Megan Martin  
Executive Vice President, Public Policy  
Center for the Study of Social Policy

Jada Brigman  
Tiffany Cannon  
Brana Phillips  
CARES Youth Ambassadors on behalf of CARES, a CSSP initiative





January 31, 2024

United States House Ways and Means Work and Welfare Subcommittee  
1139 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington DC 20515

Re: 'Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care' Hearing  
Testimony

Dear Chairman LaHood and Members of the Subcommittee:

Nebraska Appleseed is a nonprofit organization that fights for justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans. On behalf of Nebraska Appleseed, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on the Hearing on Pathways to Independence.

The issues related to supporting youth aging out of foster care are critical to the success of our future and our communities, and we greatly appreciate the Subcommittee's time and attention. We share the Committee's focus on ensuring federally funded programming through Title IV-B, Title IV-E and the John H. Chafee Program are available and meet the needs of families, children and older youth with foster care experience. Specifically, we want to express our strong support for H.R. 1446, the Foster Youth and Driving Act, introduced by Congressman Danny Davis and Nebraska's Congressman Don Bacon.

Transportation presents one of the greatest barriers to foster youth in access to employment and education, especially in rural states like Nebraska. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative found that foster youth with driver's licenses were 1.6 times as likely as their peers to attend school and almost twice as likely to work. This is consistent with what we hear from young people locally in Nebraska - not only is access to driver's licenses important for their normalcy, it is necessary for their successful transition to adulthood and independence. Limited access to consistent and reliable public transportation throughout the state increases transportation issues for young people formerly in foster care. Karolina, a Journey to Success fellow with Nebraska Appleseed, shared her own experience:

"I received my driver's license after my 18th birthday due to not being allowed to drive prior to aging out. If I was able to receive financial support and support with receiving my license before then I would have been able to work and have income which would've been beneficial to myself after leaving the system. I had to take the bus for several

months before being able to get enough money to get my license and purchase a vehicle."

As a result, in 2020, the Nebraska Legislature passed a bill (LB 216, Senator Anna Wishart) to require caseworkers to provide youth with a copy of a driver's manual, identify driver safety course, and potential means by which to access a motor vehicle for such purposes, and to provide youth with all documents necessary to obtain a driver's license, as part of transition planning for youth ages 14 and older.

We strongly support H.R. 1446 because it would provide additional federal support to states and tribes to support young people in accessing driver's education, insurance, fees, and other related costs. It also would hold states accountable to assist foster parents in helping youth in their care participate in driver's programs. These measures would help to bolster state efforts, such as Nebraska's, to further reduce transportation as a key barrier to young people and help improve outcomes.

Thank you for your leadership in ensuring high-quality services are available to older youth as they transition into adulthood and amplifying the voices of those young people throughout this process.

Sincerely,

Sarah Helvey  
Child Welfare Director

Karolina  
Journey to Success Fellow

Michayla  
Journey to Success Fellow



Driving Systems Change  
in Child Welfare

**Testimony for the Record of Sixto Cancel**  
**On Behalf of Think of Us**  
**Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways & Means**  
**Subcommittee on Work and Welfare**  
**“Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care”**  
**January 17, 2024**

Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and Honorable Members of the Subcommittee on Work and Welfare, thank you for holding the hearing *Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care* and for the opportunity to submit written testimony. On behalf of Think of Us, I want to express gratitude to the subcommittee for its bipartisan focus on thoughtful reauthorization of title IV-B of the Social Security Act and its attention to ensuring that such reauthorization meets the needs of individual populations, particularly youth who are transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

Think of Us is a research and design lab dedicated to fundamentally rearchitecting the child welfare system, with the children, families, and communities that have been impacted by the system at the center of shaping what it should be. Founded and co-led by people with lived experience in foster care, Think of Us looks system-wide to identify opportunities for the greatest impact, through participatory research, virtual support services, proximate policy, and innovative partnerships with state and local governments. Since 2020, Think of Us has engaged with over 40,000 individuals with lived experience. Our recommendations are based on the invaluable insights shared by those who have been touched by the system and child welfare organizations.

We are extremely grateful to the subcommittee for its bipartisan commitment to reforming the child welfare system, including its commitment to centering lived experience in reform. Though weather-related challenges ultimately prevented one lived expert from testifying in person, we were heartened to see the majority of experts invited to such an important hearing be people with lived experience in child welfare. We affirm the strong, bipartisan recognition of the low uptake rates for services and programs aimed at youth transitioning from foster care and the importance of driving for young people. Think of Us has long been a supporter of the bipartisan *Foster Youth and Driving Act* (H.R. 1446/S. 699). Additionally, we also wish to affirm

the subcommittee's focus on improving the ways that title IV-B works in tandem with other child welfare funding streams to maximize both efficiency and efficacy.

Think of Us would further like to affirm the subcommittee's clear recognition of the importance of stable, long-term relationships for young people. Children heal and develop in the context of their relationships with supportive adults, who serve as critical protective factors against the trauma of child maltreatment, family separation, and foster care. Too often, youth in foster care are denied the stable, long-term relationships that they need to thrive and meet their full potential. Beyond their development, this denial of safe, stable relationships hinders youth as they transition to adulthood, forcing young people into a false paradigm of "independence" rather than the healthy interdependence young adults need to thrive. We firmly agree with the subcommittee that facilitating and strengthening these relationships must be a critical priority for the child welfare system.

As the subcommittee recognized, mentorship is an important tool to establish and support these relationships and mentorship programs have a strong, positive impact on youth at all stages, including post-permanency. It is critical, however, that the subcommittee recognizes that mentors are not a replacement for family, and title IV-B's focus on prevention, reunification, and permanency must remain paramount. While we celebrate a focus on mentorship, such efforts must support and supplement, not supplant, efforts toward ensuring every child has the right to a safe, supportive, loving family—the true gold standard of child welfare.

We must also realize that not all forms of mentorship are equal. For youth in care, there is a substantial difference between those instances where someone is paid to be a mentor and those where mentorship occurs organically between youth and people in their communities. High-quality paid mentorship programs can be extremely beneficial for youth, but they can also be experienced as another painful loss for young people when mentors find other jobs and leave their lives, reinforcing the paradigm wherein young people learn adults will only show up if they are compensated.

Mentorship programs in child welfare excel when they focus on peer mentorship, where young people are able to connect and receive guidance from others who share the same experiences. Though evidence of peer support in child welfare is still nascent, the emerging evidence shows powerful results that parallel the decades of research showing the value of peer support in mental health and substance use prevention and treatment. Because peer

mentors draw from their own lived expertise and shared experiences, they are uniquely able to build relationships in ways that non-peer professionals cannot. Further, youth themselves see peer mentorship and other peer support programs as a priority. In February of 2023, Think of Us convened 20 youth Ambassadors to work with the U.S. Children's Bureau on developing a work plan for the agency's efforts to support transition-age youth. These Ambassadors [lifted up](#) peer support and mentorship as one of their six proposed focus areas for the administration, calling on the Children's Bureau to "advance peer support and mentorship models by showcasing the value and importance of modalities that center lived experience; expanding available resources for peer support programs; and encouraging child welfare jurisdictions to invest in peer support and mentorship." As the subcommittee considers how to address mentorship in title IV-B, we hope they will keep this in mind.

### **Recommendations**

Beyond what was addressed in the hearing, there are a number of significant opportunities to address the unique needs of transition-age youth during title IV-B reauthorization. Below, you will find a high-level summary of where Think of Us sees opportunities. If the subcommittee is interested in further exploring any of these ideas, we are eager to support your efforts and would gladly provide further details and considerations.

#### *Prevention*

Supporting families so that they can remain strong and stable in order to prevent child maltreatment and child welfare involvement is and should remain a core focus of title IV-B. However, while the field has rightly shifted toward prevention, there has been little attention to the development and proliferation of services and programs that explicitly focus on preventing older youth from experiencing maltreatment or entering care. We know that older youth enter care for different reasons than young children and, as a result, the prevention services and programs they need are different, as well.

Though the [Fostering Youth Transitions 2023](#) report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows significant decline in entries due to behavioral health challenges, these still were a substantial factor in removals for older youth, playing a role in 30% of removals in 2021 compared to only 7% for the general population. Crisis stabilization programs could play a substantial role in ensuring these youth are able to remain with their families and specialized programs could limit the disproportionate foster care entries for LGBTQ+ youth. While behavioral health entries are declining, the *Fostering Youth Transitions* report points to a dramatic rise in the number of

youth entering because of neglect, specifically neglect related to poverty. This points to a critical opportunity in title IV-B, as states can flexibly use title IV-B funds for concrete supports in ways that go beyond what is allowable under the title IV-E prevention program.

By naming older youth as a target population for prevention, the subcommittee can support needed innovation related to prevention for older youth. Not only would this reduce the number of youth in foster care and promote the well-being of older youth, it would also help to create a pipeline to the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse for programs that either do not exist or have not yet established the requisite evidence base.

#### *Permanency*

Title IV-B has always maintained a focus on permanency, whether through reunification or adoption. Still, the rate of older youth exiting foster care to permanency is declining, with more than 52% of young people age 16 or older in foster care aging out, a rate that is higher for Black and Hispanic/Latino youth. This is an unacceptable outcome that leaves youth without a critical safety net. As one former foster youth from Indiana that we interviewed for [Aged Out: How We're Failing Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care](#) stated, "Aging out was like my umbrella was going away." Instead of accepting aging out as an unfortunate inevitability of the foster care system, we must ensure that permanency is an option for *all* youth regardless of their age.

In title IV-B, this can involve a shift from "Adoption Promotion and Support" to "Permanency Promotion and Support," in acknowledgement that adoption is not always the right option for those in care, particularly older youth. The current wording of title IV-B does not allow support for guardianship with kin caregivers, an option that is more appropriate for many older youth who want to find permanency and exit foster care but don't wish to legally sever ties with their parents. Shifting toward permanency promotion and support would allow states to increase their support for guardianship and would also open the door for other forms of permanency that are more appropriate for older youth, including SOUL Family, which was devised by older youth in care and is currently being piloted in Kansas.

During our 2023 convening with the Children's Bureau on supporting transition-age youth, driving permanency was a clear priority for the Ambassadors. They called on the child welfare system to continue to prioritize permanency for transition-age youth and to address policies and practices that create disincentives for agencies to do so. Accordingly, they called for

accountability for states to provide a continuum of permanency services for older youth to ensure reasonable efforts are made.

Further, by naming older youth in care explicitly as a target population for permanency, whether through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other appropriate permanency options like SOUL Family, the subcommittee can push for innovation in advancing permanency for older youth in care. We have seen that such innovation is possible when states have appropriate funding and flexibility to do so. Following successful innovations using Division X funds that Congress made available in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, some states have used the flexibility of title IV-B to continue their important work providing concrete support and resources to help youth reunify or safely exit care. By uplifting this focus and providing adequate resources, Congress can continue to drive state-level innovations that will ensure no child leaves foster care without permanency.

*Engaging Impacted Youth in Program Planning*

Think of Us is extremely pleased to see that the subcommittee recognizes the vital importance of lived expertise in policymaking. Youth and families that have been impacted by the foster care system understand child welfare in ways that those without lived experience cannot, and these perspectives are crucial to developing policy and practice solutions that truly meet the unique needs of older youth in care. Transition-age youth and adults who have recently aged out of foster care are ready and able to provide crucial insights and to co-design solutions. We applaud the subcommittee for turning to lived experts for this hearing and hope that this trend will continue.

If the subcommittee wishes to further support the importance of lived expertise through title IV-B reauthorization, it can codify such practices by updating the requirements for title IV-B plan approval in 42 U.S.C. 629(b)(1) to require consultation with lived experts by updating it to say:

“The Secretary shall approve a plan that meets the requirements of subsection (a) only if the plan was developed jointly by the Secretary and the State, after consultation by the state agency **with youth and families who have experienced child welfare services, who represent the diversity of families in communities services, as well as with** appropriate public and nonprofit agencies and community based organizations with experience in administering programs of services for children and families

(including family preservation, family support, family reunification, and adoption promotion and support services).” [Emphasis added]

Such a change would make clear that Congress values the importance of lived expertise and recognizes that it is necessary to reforming the child welfare system.

The subcommittee should also consider opportunities to use title IV-B funds to encourage or require consultation and co-design with lived experts in child welfare practice. In assigning competitive funding to child welfare agencies and community-based providers, applicants could be required to outline the ways in which they will meaningfully engage those impacted by the child welfare system in designing, implementing, and evaluating services and programs. Additionally, lived experts should be called upon to deliver technical assistance and to engage in or lead title IV-B-funded evaluation, research, and training programs. Child welfare agencies should be encouraged to prioritize services and programs that are built by and centered around the needs of their communities.

In order to authentically engage people with lived experience in a way that is healthy and effective, child welfare agencies, grantees, and providers will need support, including resources and technical assistance. Engaging in the policymaking process can be traumatic for lived experts, and policymakers and practice professionals would benefit from educational materials and direct support. Further, it’s imperative that people with lived experience be compensated for their expertise. Accordingly, in addition to requiring consultation with lived experts, the subcommittee must ensure that sufficient financial resources are available for child welfare agencies and grantees to meaningfully engage and compensate those experts, whether by increasing overall funding or by earmarking funds specifically for lived experience engagement and compensation.

#### *Health Care Oversight and Coordination Plans*

As part of title IV-B, states are required to create plans for how to provide timely access and coordination of services, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. 622(b)(15). These plans are hugely important for meeting the complex health and mental health needs of young people, but there are a number of ways they can be improved to ensure health needs, and especially mental health needs, are met for youth in care.



Congress could expand the requirements for these plans to include a specific focus on mental and behavioral health. The statute mentions the importance of mental health only in passing and in requirements that the state has procedures and protocols to prevent unnecessary diagnoses. Congress could increase the focus on mental and behavioral health by adding additional requirements or by explicitly clarifying that mental and behavioral health needs are included in references to “health.” Additionally, Congress could require assurances that the child welfare agency will coordinate directly with the state Medicaid agencies and any behavioral health agencies in the state.

Congress can also improve mental and behavioral health outcomes by requiring states to have specific plans for how they will eliminate the unnecessary use of psychotropic medications, which are dramatically overused for older youth in care. There is already a requirement in the statute that states must outline “the oversight of prescription medicines, including protocols for the appropriate use and monitoring of psychotropic medications”, but this requirement is loose, and too many youth in care are still overprescribed medications to keep them compliant. It’s important that states have protocols in place for the monitoring of when psychotropic medications are used, for informed consent from youth, and for assurances that use of psychotropic medication complies with professional practice guidelines.

Additions to title IV-B plans are insufficient, however, without support to implement them. States will need additional resources, including funding and technical assistance, to effectively provide for the mental health of youth in care. This is a crucial step that young people who have experienced the system call for. In our 2023 convening with the Children’s Bureau, the lived experience Ambassadors identified this as one of the top priorities for serving transition-age youth, calling on the system to “promote a child welfare model that centers lifelong healing for youth.” The subcommittee can help create that model by including additional investments in title IV-B reauthorization that build on bipartisan efforts to address the growing mental health crisis and support a healing-centered child welfare system, including for youth transitioning from care.

#### *Kinship Care*

Think of Us is grateful to the subcommittee for its steadfast support of kinship care, including in title IV-B reauthorization. Commitment to advancing kinship care is crucial because children who are placed with people who know and love them do better on nearly every measure.

Decades of research has shown that, compared to non-kin foster care, children raised by kin experience greater stability and sense of belonging, improved educational outcomes, fewer mental and behavioral health challenges, and experience less abuse in care. Kinship care is especially important for older youth in care, as kin are more likely to take in so-called “hard to place” youth, to keep siblings together, and to remain stable if youth have behavioral challenges as a result of trauma they have experienced. Accordingly, kinship care is critical to preventing youth from experiencing the [well-documented](#) harms of unnecessary congregate care.

There are myriad opportunities for Congress to build on its long history of bipartisan support for kinship care through title IV-B, including: increased support for kinship navigator programs, making explicit that kin are eligible to receive support under the MaryLee Allen Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program that is provided to foster and adoptive families, ensuring that the same support that is given to adoption in title IV-B is given to guardianship, and investing in peer support programs for kin. By making these important investments in kinship, the subcommittee will ensure more older youth in care are able to receive the benefits of kinship care.

Additionally, Congress can take an important step to ensure that kin caregivers are prepared to meet the needs of transition-age youth and keep them out of congregate care by investing in therapeutic (or “treatment”) foster care modalities for kin caregivers, as well as by providing for wraparound supports like crisis stabilization. Kin caregivers have shown their desire to remain stable and consistent for youth with behavioral health challenges, but they need appropriate support. Additional training in therapeutic modalities of care can be critical to helping caregivers maintain this stability. Organizations like the Family Focused Treatment Association have piloted programs to tailor such training to the specific needs and context of kin caregivers. Crisis stabilization programs and related supports intervene in the case of acute behavioral health issues that would, without support, lead to disruption allowing children to remain with kin and out of congregate care. Investing in these supports is crucial to ensuring that transition-age youth are able to receive the full benefits of kinship care.

#### *Workforce Training*

As outlined in [Focus IV-B on Families](#), the consensus recommendations of Think of Us and nearly 30 other national child welfare organizations, child welfare reform can only move at the speed of the workforce. The child welfare system cannot possibly provide for the safety,

permanency, and well-being of older youth in care without addressing the dramatic workforce crisis and rampant caseworker turnover. We are grateful to Mr. Otero, Ms. Behr, and Mr. Young for their powerful testimony in support of investment in the child welfare workforce and to Chairman Smith for raising the vital importance of stabilizing the workforce in his questioning. Title IV-B reform that does not include robust investment in workforce stabilization is, at best, incomplete.

For transition-age youth, workforce training has been extremely important, especially in recent years. States rely on title IV-B to provide training related to the specific needs of older youth, training which is critical given the high turnover rate among caseworkers. As attention in the child welfare system has moved upstream, state funds have followed, meaning there is less dedicated funding for transition-age youth coming from state coffers. Accordingly, child welfare agencies are facing mounting difficulties making up the 50% match rate for training under title IV-E. In response, many are utilizing title IV-B for training for older youth because without its higher match rate they would likely have to make cuts to training. Absent an increase to the federal financial participation rate for title IV-E training, states need title IV-B training funds in order to ensure the workforce is prepared to meet the unique needs of older youth in care.

#### *Expectant and Parenting Youth*

Think of Us would like to express our gratitude to Representative Blake Moore for drawing attention to intergenerational cycles in foster care and to Mr. Lloyd for his testimony on the subject. Through our work with states, we have heard from several child welfare agencies that wish to provide targeted services for expectant and parenting youth but don't believe they can because it isn't explicitly allowed in statute. Accordingly, we suggest adding support for expectant and parenting youth in foster care to the list of examples of supportive services outlined in 42 U.S.C. 629a(a)(1).

#### *Funding*

Finally, in thinking about how title IV-B can be reformed and reauthorized in a manner to best support older youth in care, it is necessary to acknowledge that title IV-B is an extremely small funding source, one that has been allowed to shrink substantially with inflation. Over time, it makes up a smaller and smaller portion of child welfare funding, reflecting a shrinking focus on the Hill and subsequently in states for the priorities it represents—family support, family preservation, family reunification, and permanency with family.

Without further investment in title IV-B, Congress will need to temper expectations about what title IV-B reform can do. States and tribes have already stretched title IV-B funds as far as they can, and proposals to reform title IV-B at no cost to the federal budget still incur additional costs for the states. If Congress is truly invested in supporting youth as they transition from foster care, it will need to take a serious look at what it costs to truly create pathways to independence for transition-age youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your focus on improving the child welfare system for youth. Think of Us is eager to provide any support we can as the subcommittee navigates the reauthorization process. If you have any questions or if we can provide any further details about any of the ideas contained in this testimony, please contact Steven Olender, Senior Director for Strategic Policy Initiatives at [steven@thinkofus.org](mailto:steven@thinkofus.org).

**Comments for the Record  
United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Ways and Means  
Worker and Welfare Subcommittee  
Hearing on Pathways to Independence:  
Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care  
January 17, 2024 - 2:00 PM**

By Michael G. Bindner  
Center for Fiscal Equity

Chairman LaHood and Ranking Member David, thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments for the record to the Committee on this topic. They are similar to those made in May 2021. My first point has changed, but the remaining points are as valid as they were, with one small addition having to do with cost of living adjustments. I have attached a copy of the latest version of our tax reform plan for reference, particularly regarding our proposed employer-paid subtraction value added tax.

First, to better meet the needs of the non-college bound, expand the Job Corps program, especially those centers with residential facilities. The program has been a demonstration project for long enough. It needs to be expanded and devolved to the states, but with sufficient block grant support.

Students on an academic track should be enrolled at a four-year university or college (including private colleges) for the semester during which they age out.

Second, students should be paid to attend school, in other words, they should be compensated for the opportunity costs they incur for not working, although they are eligible to do so after their sixteenth birthday. Such payments should be distributed by the school at the statutory minimum wage.

All workers should have easy access to paid training, especially those with educational deficits, including linguistic ones. English as a Second Language should not only be free, but workers should be paid to attend, irrespective of immigration status. Part-time workers should also be eligible for this benefit.

This plan assumes passage of the President's proposal to provide funding through community college, although it is recommended that funding should include the freshman and sophomore year at four-year institutions as well. Technical training should be covered as well at both public and accredited private schools, including religious schools. In *Espinoza v. Montana*, prohibitions on funding private schools (Blaine Amendments) were found to be unconstitutional. New (and existing) funding should reflect that fact.

This is also the perfect time to reorganize the grade structures in education. Frankly, for some students, time spent in general education is wasted. College credits, where applicable, should be granted for advanced high school work so that graduation can occur earlier. Community college or technical high school could start after grade 10.

As an aside, it is past time for the Catholic School system to join the non-college bound sector, rather than focusing mostly on college prep. Grades 8-10 would be combined, with middle school from grades 5-7. Neither of these would include full-contact football.

Third, foster youth with children themselves would receive a refundable child tax credit for each. The current COVID level is \$300 per month for young children and \$250 per month for others. This should not only be made permanent, it should be doubled. Foster parents would receive payments for foster-grandchildren and foster children. States can either supplement the payment for all parents with an additional stipend for their service as foster parents.

Foster youth should be allowed to leave early (and foster siblings) if their affairs are in order (including receipt of child tax credits as parents) and be provided with continued help if their affairs are not, especially those with emotional or cognitive challenges. For such individuals, different funding streams and supervision will be made available.

Fourth, the foster care system must not be used to destroy the families of addicted parents. Rather, specially trained foster parents should foster the addict (including alcoholics) and their child or children. Addicts should not be pressured to give up permanent custody, nor should providers expect them too. This is not to say that they cannot be allowed to use without concern.

Once diagnosed, relapse should be grounds for readmission in a longer term setting, but with the understanding that seeking recovery will not mean permanent loss of custody. Too many addicts use the desire to maintain relationships with children to not work on themselves adequately. Taking permanent loss of custody off the table takes that excuse away.

Fifth payments for tuition, stipends and family support would be funded by employer-paid subtraction value added taxes (please see the attachment). Ideally, both state and federal subtraction VAT will be enacted. A federal VAT would be levied to assure that a minimum amount of funding is available should states underfund their programs, which some will.

The American Recovery Plan Act requires payment of the child tax credit in advance of the annual tax filing. This is appropriate and will change the culture of such credits, which should be for continuing support, not an annual bonus.

The current plan is for the IRS to manage payments. I submit that, over the long-term, it would be more acceptable to distribute them either through other government subsidies, such as Unemployment Insurance, Disability Insurance, or a training stipend OR through wages. **In the latter case, until a subtraction value added tax is in place, the credit would be paid in advance by employers and then deducted from their quarterly tax payment.**

Sixth, wages must be increased for all workers, including foster youth, whether within the system or exiting it. Aging out or early exit from foster care, even if education is not pursued, would be much easier with a higher minimum wage by higher minimum wage, an increase to \$10 per hour should be immediate and indexed to inflation.

It is the poor job indeed where the physical productivity of workers in comparison with other factors is under this level, especially when child tax credits are excluded from the equation. The intermediate goal should be either a \$12 minimum wage (so that it is comparable to the buying power experienced in 1965) or an \$11 wage with a 32 hour work week. Over time, the minimum wage should reach \$16 (before indexing).

As an aside, that such a wage increase would drive other wages up is an additional reason to support a higher wage, especially when the difference between worker pay and the pay of "middle management" is glaring.

***How the public and private sectors compensate for inflation must be reformed. It contributed to price inflation because prices chase the median dollar of adjusted gross income, which is paid to families in the 90th percentile. Equal dollar per hour wage and equal monthly COLAs for Social Security will control inflation while reducing inequality.***

The conditions of franchise employment and agreement deserve attention as well in terms of agreed to standards, payment of franchise owners in low wage industries and the ability of workers to organize. If some firms decide that turning franchise employment into full-time employment, so much the better.

Lastly, the unemployment insurance must be less punitive, particularly where younger workers are concerned. In lower wage jobs, the preference is to find potential supervisors (whose compensation is usually subpar as well) and keep a file of infractions to justify firing workers who do not work out. A punitive work environment that does not exactly make any kind of work attractive.

In certain circumstances, unemployment compensation should be available on a no-fault basis. Better still, employees should be allowed to voluntarily leave firms with a history of quickly dismissing employees without penalty. There should be no expendable jobs or workers.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. We are, of course, available for direct testimony or to answer questions by members and staff.

**Attachment - Tax Reform, Center for Fiscal Equity, March 24, 2023**

**Synergy:** The President's Budget for 2024 proposed a 25% minimum tax on high incomes. Because most high income households make their money on capital gains, rather than salaries, an asset value added tax replacing capital gains taxes (both long and short term) would be set to that rate. The top rate for a subtraction VAT surtax on high incomes (wages, dividends and interest paid) would be set to 25%, as would the top rate for income surtaxes paid by very high income earners. Surtaxes collected by businesses would begin for any individual payee receiving \$75,000 from any source at a 6.25% rate and top out at 25% at all such income over \$375,000. At \$450,000, individuals would pay an additional 6.25% on the next \$75,000 with brackets increasing until a top rate of 25% on income over \$750,000. This structure assures that no one games the system by changing how income is earned to lower their tax burden.

**Individual payroll taxes.** A floor of \$20,000 would be instituted for paying these taxes, with a ceiling of \$75,000. This lower ceiling reduces the amount of benefits received in retirement for higher income individuals. The logic of the \$20,000 floor reflects full time work at a \$10 per hour minimum wage offered by the Republican caucus in response to proposals for a \$15 wage. The majority needs to take the deal. Doing so in relation to a floor on contributions makes adopting the minimum wage germane in the Senate for purposes of Reconciliation. The rate would be set at 6.25%.

**Employer payroll taxes.** Unless taxes are diverted to a personal retirement account holding voting and preferred stock in the employer, the employer levy would be replaced by a goods and receipts tax of 6.25%. Every worker who meets a minimum hour threshold would be credited for having paid into the system, regardless of wage level. All employees would be credited on an equal dollar basis, rather than as a match to their individual payroll tax. The tax rate would be adjusted to assure adequacy of benefits for all program beneficiaries.

**High income Surtaxes.** As above, taxes would be collected on all individual income taxes from salaries, income and dividends, which exclude business taxes filed separately, starting at \$400,00 per year. This tax will fund net interest on the debt (which will no longer be rolled over into new borrowing), redemption of the Social Security Trust Fund, strategic, sea and non-continental U.S. military deployments, veterans' health benefits as the result of battlefield injuries, including mental health and addiction and eventual debt reduction.

**Asset Value-Added Tax (A-VAT).** A replacement for capital gains taxes and the estate tax. It will apply to asset sales, exercised options, inherited and gifted assets and the profits from short sales. Tax payments for option exercises, IPOs, inherited, gifted and donated assets will be marked to market, with prior tax payments for that asset eliminated so that the seller gets no benefit from them. In this perspective, it is the owner's increase in value that is taxed. As with any sale of liquid or real assets, sales to a qualified broad-based Employee Stock Ownership Plan will be tax free. These taxes will fund the same spending items as high income and subtraction VAT surtaxes. There will be no requirement to hold assets for a year to use this rate. This also implies that this tax will be levied on all eligible transactions.

The 3.8% ACA-SM tax will be repealed as a separate tax, with health care funding coming through a subtraction value added tax levied on all employment and other gross profit. The 25% rate is meant to be a permanent compromise, as above. Any changes to this rate would be used to adjust subtraction VAT surtax and high income surtax rates accordingly. This rate would be negotiated on a world-wide basis to prevent venue seeking for stock trading.



**Subtraction Value-Added Tax (S-VAT).** Corporate income taxes and collection of business and farm income taxes will be replaced by this tax, which is an employer paid Net Business Receipts Tax. S-VAT is a vehicle for tax benefits, including

Health insurance or direct care, including veterans' health care for non-battlefield injuries and long term care.

Employer paid educational costs in lieu of taxes are provided as either employee-directed contributions to the public or private unionized school of their choice or direct tuition payments for employee children or for workers (including ESL and remedial skills). Wages will be paid to students to meet opportunity costs.

Most importantly, a refundable child tax credit at median income levels (with inflation adjustments) distributed with pay.

Subsistence level benefits force the poor into servile labor. Wages and benefits must be high enough to provide justice and human dignity. This allows the ending of state administered subsidy programs and discourages abortions, and as such enactment must be scored as a must pass in voting rankings by pro-life organizations (and feminist organizations as well). To assure child subsidies are distributed, S-VAT will not be border adjustable.

As above, S-VAT surtaxes are collected on all income distributed over \$75,000, with a beginning rate of 6.25%. replace income tax levies collected on the first surtaxes in the same range. Some will use corporations to avoid these taxes, but that corporation would then pay all invoice and subtraction VAT payments (which would distribute tax benefits). Distributions from such corporations will be considered salary, not dividends.

**Invoice Value-Added Tax (I-VAT)** Border adjustable taxes will appear on purchase invoices. The rate varies according to what is being financed. If Medicare for All does not contain offsets for employers who fund their own medical personnel or for personal retirement accounts, both of which would otherwise be funded by an S-VAT, then they would be funded by the I-VAT to take advantage of border adjustability.

I-VAT forces everyone, from the working poor to the beneficiaries of inherited wealth, to pay taxes and share in the cost of government. As part of enactment, gross wages will be reduced to take into account the shift to S-VAT and I-VAT, however net income will be increased by the same percentage as the I-VAT. Inherited assets will be taxed under A-VAT when sold. Any inherited cash, or funds borrowed against the value of shares, will face the I-VAT when sold or the A-VAT if invested.

I-VAT will fund domestic discretionary spending, equal dollar employer OASI contributions, and non-nuclear, non-deployed military spending, possibly on a regional basis. Regional I-VAT would both require a constitutional amendment to change the requirement that all excises be national and to discourage unnecessary spending, especially when allocated for electoral reasons rather than program needs. The latter could also be funded by the asset VAT (decreasing the rate by from 19.25% to 13%).

**Contact Sheet**

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**Committee on Ways and Means  
Worker and Welfare Subcommittee  
Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care  
January 17, 2024 - 2:00 PM**

All submissions must include a list of all clients, persons and/or organizations on whose behalf the witness appears:

This testimony is not submitted on behalf of any client, person or organization other than the Center itself, which is so far unfunded by any donations.



January 31, 2024

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work & Welfare**

*Written Comments for Hearing, "Work & Welfare Subcommittee Hearing on Pathways to Independence: Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care"*

Youth Villages would like to thank Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, Subcommittee Chairman LaHood, Subcommittee Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the House Committee on Ways and Means for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.

Youth Villages is a national leader in children's mental and behavioral health, focused on providing the most effective help to children with emotional and behavioral challenges, their families, and young people who are aging out of state services. By partnering with innovative state leaders and philanthropists, Youth Villages spurs positive change for child welfare, children's mental health organizations, and juvenile justice systems through public-private partnerships, value- or performance-based contracting, and a focus on achieving long-lasting positive outcomes for the most challenging youth and families.

Youth Villages has grown significantly over the past 36 years, helping tens of thousands of youth, young adults, and families annually across 25 states, the District of Columbia, and more than 100 locations live successfully. We continue to enhance our evidence-based programs and long-lasting outcomes by focusing on providing the most effective help to those who need it the most.

We commend the Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this important hearing and appreciate the opportunity to submit our recommendations to redesign federal child welfare programs to reduce fragmentation and duplication. Youth Villages acknowledges and applauds the long history of bipartisan collaboration and leadership on child welfare programs and services. The hearing contained important themes and positive ideas with which we agree, some of which we will highlight below.

**Transition-Aged Foster Youth**

Young adults have been in the custody of the government for much of their lives, often in a foster family or a group home setting and subject to monthly meetings with a caseworker and semi-annual appearances before a judge. When they reach legal adulthood (between 18 and 21, depending on the state or jurisdiction), many of their supports disappear abruptly as they are thrust out of the system unprepared to meet the demands of daily independent living. At a critical juncture in their lives, these young adults too often lack a reliable support system and have yet to acquire the skills to find housing, hold jobs, or pursue an education on their own. Add often significant and debilitating mental health challenges, sometimes small children of their own, and few financial resources—and the obstacles to reaching a successful adulthood become nearly insurmountable.

Most state agencies and private providers offer a haphazard array of segmented services to these transitioning young adults. Some programs focus on housing; others provide "light-touch" case management. Through a state child welfare agency, young people may also access additional discrete services such as tutoring, career

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Commented [JK1]: do we also want to add young adults here?

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Commented [JK3]: We typically use young adult.



preparation, and driver education; or tap into housing placements or financial assistance. But these disparate programs seldom are sufficient in helping young people transition into adulthood, nor do they effectively utilize federal funding that is available to support this population.

#### Youth Villages provides an innovative solution to supporting transition-aged youth.

In 1999, Youth Villages was the first national organization to develop a program specifically targeting the transition-aged youth population, having developed it before the federal government officially recognized the needs of youth who age out of foster care after turning 18.

LifeSet, our signature program for this population, is **one of the largest programs in the US helping former foster care and transition-aged youth become successful, independent adults**. Over 20,000 young adults have received LifeSet services to date. Most importantly, it is **one of the only programs to show positive, proven results** through a very large randomized clinical trial. LifeSet services are highly individualized and comprehensive, tailoring clinically driven treatment plans to the strengths and needs of each young adult. One-on-one sessions take place in the young adult's community and natural environment, and hands-on experiences ensure that participants are able to apply what they learn in real-world settings.

Underlying Youth Villages' success is a clinical approach that pairs ongoing guidance from a trained clinical Licensed Program Expert (LPE) with a robust online portal containing hundreds of evidence-based and best practice interventions that help the LPE and frontline staff implement Youth Villages programs. This clinical approach, called GuideTree, ensures that a young person receives best-fit interventions at the appropriate time.

**LifeSet costs an average of \$10,500<sup>1</sup> per youth, a relatively small investment compared to the huge benefits for both the young people served and society as a whole.** According to research by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the lifetime costs to society of disparate outcomes in education, early parenthood, homelessness, and incarceration for an annual cohort of young people aging out of foster care amount to approximately \$4.1 billion.<sup>2</sup> That makes the lifetime cost of doing nothing for this vulnerable population roughly \$180,000 per young adult, which does not include the costs of many other challenges with which former foster youth are often faced. For example, treatment for PTSD averages \$10,000,<sup>3</sup> and for general mental health issues about \$1,600 annually.<sup>4</sup> By doing nothing, governments are not only failing the young people entrusted to their care but also imposing a significant financial burden on public programs and society.

<sup>1</sup> LifeSet program costs include clinical consultation, access to the online clinical portal, fidelity monitoring and operational support that are built into the ongoing licensing fees and model cost structure.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2019). *Future Savings: The Economic Potential of Successful Transitions From Foster Care to Adulthood*. Notes: (1) One cohort = 23,000 young adults. This estimate is based on five years of data (2011-2015) from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS). (2) This is an updated version of a report published in 2013 and cited in Youth Villages' Phase 1 scaling plan. The total economic cost to society was reduced in this more recent version due to a change in methodology in calculating detention, victim and incarceration costs.

<sup>3</sup> What PTSD Costs Families. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/what-ptsd-costs-families-2014-04-04>

<sup>4</sup> The Economic Burden of Mental Health Care. <https://www.uspharmacist.com/article/the-economic-burden-of-mental-health-care>.

Commented [SC4]: maybe add "through a very large randomized clinical trial?"

Commented [JK5]: Licensed Program Expert

Commented [JK6]: LPE

Commented [SOT]: Do we want to name GuideTree

Commented [WK8]: Is this an annual cost or the cost for the length of the program?

Commented [SO988]: Length of the program



As this study illustrates, there is huge upside potential for LifeSet to make a significant economic impact as researchers grow better able to monetize benefits and Youth Villages continues to enhance the model.

**The improvements and enhancements in the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, Extended Foster Care, and other federal supports**

The **Chafee Program** is authorized at \$143 million annually and is the largest funding stream dedicated specifically to helping youth with foster care experience, ages 14 and older, transition to adulthood. States must provide a 20 percent match to the federal funds and have great flexibility in how they can spend them, including on educational, employment, financial, and housing support. However, the program has not kept up with inflation or the increase in the eligibility of the population with the passage of recent legislation including Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) and the Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123). FFPSA is an opportunity for states to receive federal reimbursement for robust, evidence-based programs and services, like LifeSet.

Every year 20,000-25,000 young people exit the foster care system. These young people leave care not because they have been reunified with their families, have been adopted, or found another form of permanency but simply because there is an age limit on federal funding. While some states may extend this support beyond age eighteen and the Chafee program offers limited funding for transitional services to these young people, all too often the result is that foster youth find themselves on their own at age eighteen. Current federal law does provide mechanisms by which to cover this vulnerable population with the support needed as they leave the care of the child welfare system.

LifeSet is delivered in 20 states and the District of Columbia with 21 public and private agencies trained to implement the model. The program is funded a little differently in each state and some states often use Chafee funding with other funding streams, but no state has fully funded the program with Chafee or child welfare funding solely. In Tennessee, Youth Villages and the Department of Children's Services (DCS) entered into a public-private partnership that matched state and philanthropic dollars to deliver the LifeSet program. **In 2019, to increase continuity of care, reduce duplication of services, and increase access to high-quality services for all transition-aged youth and young adults aging out.** Youth Villages began providing extended foster care case management integrated with the established LifeSet program. Due to the funding limitations of the Chafee program, states use a mix of funding streams including state and local dollars to support the LifeSet program. Chafee funding is used in Connecticut, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia.

We commend Representatives Judy Chu of California and Erin Houchin of Indiana for the introduction of the bipartisan *Increasing Access to Foster Care Through 21 Act (H.R. 7910)*. Approximately 30 states in all are participating in Fostering Connections, enabling young people to remain in care until the age of 21.<sup>5</sup> Government leaders clearly want to do more for older youth, but **most states lack the age-appropriate, evidence-based**

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/>; <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/699219.pdf>; <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/extending-foster-care-to-18.aspx>

Commented [SO10]: Do we want to include the cost of funding LifeSet?

Commented [SC11R10]: I think you should if your point is that states don't get enough funding to support robust, EOPs, like LifeSet. Maybe add that somewhere?

Commented [JK12]: Are you referencing differences in funding here? It feels important to note that implementation is within the fidelity guidelines of the model if not.



programs and supports these young people need, and they do not know how to get the right services to the right kids at the right time.

With the passage of Family First, Title IV-E prevention funding can be used for evidence-based programs for pregnant and parenting foster youth and those at risk of entering or re-entering foster care. In 2019, both houses of Congress encouraged Health and Human Services to maximize the impact of Family First and prioritize evidence-based programs for older youth, a proposal yet to be achieved.

Many states have simply extended to 18-to-21-year-olds the same Title IV-E services they offer children. Yet awareness is growing that this population needs something different to address the impact of trauma on brain development and help young adults approach risk-taking responsibly and gain greater self-regulation, coping, and resiliency skills.<sup>6</sup>

#### Modernizing Services Array and Delivery

As a service practitioner having served 9,000 plus transition-aged youth in 2023, Youth Villages understand the impact of high-quality service delivery for the population. Multiple remarks made during the Subcommittee hearing acknowledged that many young adults leave foster care with a lack of adult connections and mentors. We find that through our LifeSet model, which connects young adults to highly trained specialists that help them set and achieve their individual goals and build or (re)build healthy relationships, young people develop critical interpersonal skills and build key networks that help to drive their overall success in the program and beyond.

Youth Villages strives to expand high-quality services for older youth and is piloting and testing LifeSet program enhancements such as **evaluating a model variation that integrates LifeSet with federally mandated case management**. In this model, the LifeSet specialist assumes both the responsibilities of LifeSet and the federally mandated responsibilities of extended foster care case management. There is a strong case for such integration: **the public agency's costs are lowered because duplication between services is eliminated**, a young person does not have to meet with two different professionals, and unifying both functions opens up federal Title IV-E funding. Youth Villages is implementing this integrated approach directly in Tennessee and is working with state leaders in Louisiana and Illinois to help LifeSet partners there integrate case management with LifeSet.

Today, the workforce directly serving our target population nationally has very high turnover and frequently little training and supervision, and often meets with young people without a clear plan for how to support them, an understanding of their individual goals, or much structure to the session beyond completing mandated paperwork. We believe that our clinical approach, GuideTree, **can improve both the preparedness of the workforce and the quality and individualization of treatment/sessions with young adults**.

**LifeSet still has the strongest evidence base in the field, showing significant impacts across multiple domains**, including increased earnings, housing stability and economic well-being, as well as improved health

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aecf.org/resources/the-adolescent-brain-foster-care/>

Commented [SC13]: this is a silly comment, but make sure to do one last "highlight" to make sure that all the paragraph alignment and spacing is the same throughout the doc. It seems to slightly vary.

Commented [OS14R13]: Yes -)

Commented [JK15]: Grammar? I don't understand this sentence. :)



and safety outcomes. This evidence is critical in securing new government contracts, and LifeSet meets the minimum evidence standards required by the new Family First law to draw down federal prevention funding.

**LifeSet Specialists serve as coaches, mentors, and advocates**, walking alongside young adults and supporting them through personal and professional challenges and accomplishments. Like Benchmark mentors, LifeSet Specialists directly deliver evidence-based interventions at minimum once a week and provide intensive, 24/7 on-call availability. Some of the main differences of LifeSet specialists to traditional mentors, is that they are clinically skilled and trained to recognize trauma and mental behavioral conditions that plague youth transitioning from the foster care system.

#### Youth Engagement

More than a decade has passed and agencies and organizations at the local, state, and national level have active youth advisory boards. We believe that there is one if not multiple advisory boards of some form in each state with the exception of Puerto Rico that actively lead or have an adult-youth partnership with current or former foster youth. Youth Villages has actively engaged with community partners in multiple jurisdictions and at the national level that have "advisory boards" or youth engagement boards that are involved in system change or advocacy efforts. We find that there is a disconnection at the practice level, where current or former foster youth have the efficacy and decision-making power to improve on-the-ground practices.

At Youth Villages, we have formed a multi-jurisdiction group of advisors with lived experience that help build awareness and inform our work. We seek regular guidance from older youth with lived experience to inform our work as we enter new geographies, refine the model, and communicate with key stakeholders on policy and practice. Individuals with lived experience voices are critical to the discussion of system change, as they are the foremost experts on types of support that did and would have had the greatest impact on their outcomes.

#### Conclusion

Our vision for the last decade and still remains is to ensure that every young adult aging out of foster care or on track to age out has the best opportunity, skills, and resources for successful adulthood. Youth Villages' LifeSet model is uniquely designed to help young people aging out of the foster care system. The program model is tailored to put young adults in the driver's seat to set and achieve their own goals; LifeSet helps youth maintain stable and suitable housing, remain free from involvement with the law, participate in educational and vocational programs, and develop other critical life skills.

Youth Villages set out on an ambitious plan to ensure that nearly all 20,000<sup>7</sup> young adults aging out of foster care annually have access to the resources and support they need and deserve to reach their full potential. Our system continues to fail many of these young adults when they leave state custody; they are more likely than their general peers to drop out of school, become parents before they are ready, and experience homelessness or incarceration.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Published data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2021 data. <https://www.aecf.bhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ch/afcars-report-29.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Future Savings Report from AECF <https://www.aecf.org/m/resources/aecf-futuresavings-2019.pdf>

Commented [JK16]: clinically

Commented [SC17]: Are we asking for something or is this document just to inform them that LifeSet exists, how it works, and how it operates?

Commented [OS18R17]: just information only



Youth Villages is passionate about and committed to changing these outcomes for transitioning youth at a national scale.

Youth Villages appreciates the opportunity to offer our comments to the Subcommittee in regard to supporting transition-aged foster youth. We wish to again thank Chairman LaHood and Ranking Member Davis for hosting this hearing and for convening a diverse panel of expert witnesses and taking up this complex issue. We appreciate the committee's outreach, and we look forward to continuing our efforts to help you address this problem in a strong bipartisan manner.

If you would like additional information, please contact Shaquita Ogletree, Director of Federal Policy at 404-663-6406 or [shaquita.ogletree@youthvillages.org](mailto:shaquita.ogletree@youthvillages.org).

Again, many thanks for your advocacy on behalf of youth and young adults.

Sincerely,

Patrick W. Lawler  
Chief Executive Officer  
Youth Villages





#### LifeSet Youth Testimonials

##### Brayden, 20-year-old from Oregon

Please read the following testimony from Brayden, a 20-year-old young adult who is currently enrolled in a LifeSet program through Youth Villages in Oregon, as he reflects on his experience engaging with dedicated specialists who enabled him to access critical resources and opportunities.

*Hello, my name is Brayden. I am 20 years old and currently enrolled in ILP LifeSet programs with Youth Villages in Oregon. I re-entered the foster care system when I was 14. Through LifeSet and ILP, I was assigned a dedicated Specialist who engaged me in numerous opportunities to develop financial literacy skills and access grants and federal funding for external living costs.*

*My experience has been nothing short of a true blessing. Having come from a neglectful home, heavily medicated childhood, and dual-systems involvement, I entered multiple foster homes, Behavioral Rehabilitation Services (BRS) placements, hotel rooms, group homes, lockdown facilities, proctor parents, respite, and experienced homelessness.*

*Writing this testimony today I think of all the ways I have been helped, supported, and guided through the system by guardians and mentors, as all have been a crucial part of my growth, development, and journey from a young teenage boy to a stable and confident adult man. Through LifeSet and ILP services, I have received unwavering support from mentors and the surrounding community, all of which are crucial to building a network of support and engagement for a young person and increasing the success of their bright futures.*

*Having navigated the system and various placements with these mentors and support, and with all the dedicated resources given to me throughout my time in the system, I have achieved far more than I ever dreamed of alongside my fellow peers, mentors, and impressionable adults in my life. This is all possible given that a young person has access to the resources, support, and loving community that should always be there.*

##### Ricky

Ricky, a LifeSet Scholar, recalls how LifeSet enabled him to develop plans for his future with the help of his specialist. During their weekly meetings, they focused on goal setting, coping skills, and academic progress among other areas. With the help of his LifeSet specialist, Ricky got his grades back on track and not only graduated high school on time, but with honors.

Eventually, he was accepted to 10 out of 10 colleges to which he applied; received a part-time role; learned how to budget; and, according to him, learned how to be a better person.

Ricky refers to LifeSet as a dream come true, having afforded him the support he could not receive from his parents. He says he will always be grateful for LifeSet, and feels he could not have achieved all that he did without it.