

**Written Testimony of Lisa Guillette, Executive Director, Foster Forward
Before the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Work and Welfare
Hearing: "Aging Out is Not a Plan: Reimagining Futures for Foster Youth"
June 12, 2025**

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

Thank you for the invitation to testify. My name is Lisa Guillette, and for the past twenty-two years, I've served as Executive Director of Foster Forward, a nationally recognized nonprofit in Rhode Island committed to empowering lives impacted by foster care. For three decades, Foster Forward has been a catalyst for innovation in child welfare, providing housing, workforce, and financial capability solutions to help young people in and aging out of care build stable, thriving futures.

Today, I bring insights from three key perspectives:

- Our implementation and national replication of the Works Wonders® workforce model
- Our bold entry into affordable housing development for youth transitioning from foster care or experiencing homelessness,
- And my personal experience mentoring, and ultimately becoming a forever family to a young woman who once faced foster care and homelessness and is now a law school graduate living and working independently in Florida.

Reimagining Futures for Foster Youth: How Foster Forward Integrates Workforce and Housing to Prevent Youth from Aging Out Without a Plan

At Foster Forward, we believe that no young person should age out of foster care without a real plan and concrete support. Christelle's story shows what's possible when we combine workforce readiness, housing stability, and trusted relationships to reimagine what the transition to adulthood can look like. Christelle entered Foster Forward's Works Wonders® program after connecting with our Drop-In Center while experiencing homelessness. At a critical turning point in her life, Christelle found more than just a training opportunity, she found a network of support.

Christelle's progress in Works Wonders® mirrored that of a toddler learning to walk. At first, she was unsteady and unsure, reaching for anything or anyone to keep her balance. She took small steps through our Employment and Empowerment Training, stumbled a bit when she first enrolled in a CNA program, and at times considered giving up. But just like a child learning to find their footing, she had caring adults alongside her offering a steady hand, cheering her on, and helping her stand back up when she fell.

Her employment coach offered consistent, personalized guidance. At the same time, she began the daunting process of applying for a Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) housing voucher. Christelle received step-by-step help and developmentally appropriate, strengths-based support

that allowed her to build confidence. She was also surrounded by peers who had walked similar paths, young people who helped her feel seen, heard, and not alone as she rebuilt her life.

Christelle not only earned her CNA certification, she also moved into her first apartment in a brand-new unit set aside for youth aging out of foster care, thanks to Foster Forward's partnership with Rhode Island's child welfare agency, a local housing authority, and a community development corporation. Foster Forward helped her overcome long-standing barriers like renewing her driver's license and registration, seemingly minor steps that made a major difference in her ability to maintain employment and independence.

Christelle's journey reflects the essence of Foster Forward's service blueprint for transition-age youth. At its heart is *Works Wonders*®—a youth-powered workforce development model co-designed with young people who have experienced foster care. It blends the best of child welfare and workforce development practices to support youth ages 16 to 26, many of whom are navigating trauma, housing instability, and the absence of a family safety net. Launched in Rhode Island with a \$2 million federal grant from the Children's Bureau, and developed in partnership with DCYF, the Department of Labor and Training, and the Governor's Workforce Board, *Works Wonders*® is now being replicated in Indiana and Tennessee. In fact, Dr. Maggie Stevens, President and CEO of Foster Forward's Indiana-based replication partner *Foster Success*, is also providing testimony to this Committee.

Bridging Child Welfare and Workforce Systems

Works Wonders® was designed specifically to address the failure of traditional workforce systems to meet the needs of youth aging out of care. These systems often:

- Assume stable housing, transportation, access to critical documents and parental guidance that routinely discusses and models how to network, apply and interview for jobs.
- Prioritize job placement over foundational skills and relationship building.
- Lack trauma-informed practices and youth-centered approaches that include peer support.

By contrast, *Works Wonders*® intentionally integrates elements that have been proven to drive success:

- Youth leadership in co-design, program delivery and evaluation
- Wraparound support that includes housing, transportation, childcare, financial coaching and flexible funds to address any barrier a youth may face.
- Deep partnerships with employers who are coached to support experiential learning and youth development.
- Career coaching delivered by trained, consistent adult mentors.

Foster youth typically enter the program in "survival mode." Our first objective is to stabilize them. Then we work together to build a pathway toward thriving—not just economically, but socially and emotionally.

Leveraging Federal Programs: WIOA, Chafee, and FYI Vouchers

A. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

Strengths

- Foster Forward's Works Wonders® model is fully aligned with WIOA, leveraging Youth Workforce funding to deliver paid, real-time work experiences.
- The current 200-hour paid Work Experience (WEX) allocation is especially impactful for foster youth with limited job history who need to build soft skills in supportive environments.

Challenges

- Despite categorical eligibility, foster youth face enrollment and documentation barriers, often without family support to navigate complex requirements.
- WIOA funding is insufficient to meet demand; many programs lack the capacity to help youth obtain vital documents or maintain engagement through the required one-year follow-up period.
- Rigid sequencing (e.g., requiring GED completion before paid WEX) delays access to opportunities.
- Narrow performance metrics (employment, school enrollment, wage gains) can disincentivize providers from serving youth who require more time to achieve benchmarks.

Recommendations

1. Streamline Eligibility & Documentation

Allow alternative documentation pathways for foster youth to reduce enrollment delays.

2. Expand Funding & Wraparound Support

Increase program capacity to deliver individualized services and sustain engagement post-placement.

3. Preserve & Expand WEX Flexibility

Maintain flexibility in WEX design and consider increasing the hour cap for youth with limited prior work experience.

4. Adjust Metrics & Program Timing

Allow concurrent GED and work experience participation and modify performance timelines to reflect foster youth's unique development trajectory.

B. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood

Strengths

- Chafee provides flexible funding for youth up to age 21 (and up to 23 in states that extend care), and ETV support through age 26.
- Funds can be used for housing, education, transportation, mental health care, and other critical support.

Challenges

- Chafee is consistently underutilized—\$8.9 million in unspent funds were returned in FY2022 due to administrative barriers and lack of youth engagement (GAO, 2023).
- Many states operate on “autopilot,” spending down funds without strategic planning, co-design with youth, or outcome-driven implementation.
- Low rates of high school and GED completion among foster youth undermine access to ETVs and related postsecondary or workforce training opportunities.
 - For example, while 84% of all Rhode Island youth earn a diploma or GED within four years, only **half of youth aging out of foster care** do so by age 19.
 - Without a diploma or GED, youth have difficulty accessing ETVs and are often excluded from apprenticeships and career training programs that require minimum educational credentials.

Recommendations

1. **Modernize Program Design**
Require youth engagement in service planning; shift focus from fund spend-down to intentional, impact-driven investment.
2. **Fund Mentoring & Peer Support**
Scale evidence-based mentoring and peer networks to help youth build relationships and navigate transitions.
3. **Enable Flexible & Responsive Use of Funds**
Ensure Chafee remains a rapid-response tool to cover essential needs (e.g., housing deposits, clothing, mental health supports) with state-level accountability, not restrictive limits.
4. **Extend Age Eligibility for Workforce & Case Management Supports**
Permit use of Chafee funds through age 26 for youth who need longer on-ramps to career and life readiness.
Fund specialized caseworkers trained to provide developmentally appropriate support to older youth.
5. **Maximize Utilization & Oversight**
Require states to coordinate with auditors and reallocate unspent funds mid-cycle to ensure maximum impact and prevent lapses.
6. **Strengthen High School and GED Completion Strategies**
States with low ETV uptake should examine how Chafee dollars are being used to support high school and GED attainment—essential prerequisites for postsecondary success, apprenticeships, and career-track employment.

C. Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Vouchers

Strengths

- FYI vouchers provide essential housing support for youth exiting foster care and are a key tool for preventing homelessness.

Challenges

- FYI requires recipients to be afforded supportive services, but child welfare agencies are reluctant to provide or coordinate those services for a population of youth that is transitioning off of their caseload.
- Without strong public-private partnerships, integrated supportive services, and safe and affordable housing stock, vouchers alone are insufficient for long-term stability.

Recommendations

1. **Fund PHA–Child Welfare Service Partnerships**

Allocate resources to formalize partnerships between PHAs, child welfare agencies and private providers to deliver and coordinate voluntary support services.

2. **Leverage Chafee as a Bridge**

Allow Chafee funds to cover the supportive services required by FYI, ensuring youth receive housing and the scaffolding needed to maintain it.

Relationship-Centered and Peer-Led Design

Works Wonders® is a nationally recognized, evidence-supported career development program specifically designed to meet the unique needs of youth and young adults with experience in foster care. The model breaks from traditional workforce programs that often attempt to "plug-and-play" youth into adult systems of employment. Instead, it centers relationship-building, individualized coaching, peer engagement, and hands-on work experiences to help youth not only find jobs but also develop the confidence, self-efficacy, and human-centered skills needed for long-term success.

At its core, Works Wonders® is a five-step process: Enrollment, E2 Training (Employment and Empowerment), Career Coaching, Experiential Learning, and Employment or Postsecondary Placement. Throughout every phase, youth are treated as partners, not clients—co-designing their career paths, refining program tools, and shaping the evolution of the model itself.

Youth participate in group-based employment readiness training while receiving one-on-one coaching from trained Career & Education Coaches. The program embeds peer mentors and youth leaders to reduce isolation and provide relatable support. Coaches work closely with employer partners to co-create work experience objectives, build in real-time feedback, and ensure that placements align with youth interests and capabilities.

Works Wonders® has three core goals: help youth meaningfully explore career paths, provide wraparound support to eliminate barriers and achieve career/education plan goals and connect youth to education, training, and employment experiences that develop both technical and relational skills. This relational, youth-driven model is essential for young people who have experienced foster care and other disruptions. Neuroscience shows that the adolescent brain, especially in the areas of executive function, continues to develop well into a young person's twenties. Positive adult relationships, decision-making opportunities, and supported risk-taking

accelerate this development. The program's design was shaped from inception by youth with lived experience. Members of "The Voice," Rhode Island's youth advocacy board, helped design the intervention, co-created the curriculum and tools (like the E2 Navigator), tested the materials, and established performance standards for career coaching. This commitment to youth participation remains central to the model's success.

As automation and AI transform the labor market, these relational competencies such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, communication, and teamwork are what set foster youth up to succeed and stay employed. Works Wonders® intentionally cultivates these skills so young people aren't displaced by technology but can thrive alongside it. The model has been strengthened through deep, sustained partnerships with over 40 employer partners across Rhode Island. Employer input shapes training content, performance expectations, and placement matching. In return, employers benefit from vetted, supported interns who come with a built-in support team. One partner, Strive Realty, shared that they were able to hire quality youth they wouldn't have otherwise considered due to age. In their words, the program introduced viable candidates they had struggled to find elsewhere.

Elijah's story illustrates how this model works in practice. Elijah first visited our Drop-In Center while unhoused. He was referred to both the Works Wonders® and Your Way Home programs and connected with an on-site clinician who helped him address past trauma, build communication and conflict resolution skills, and learn professional social norms. While completing the classroom portion of Works Wonders®, Elijah began to build trust with his peer mentor and employment coach. Quiet at first, he eventually shared his interest in IT. He had been doing DoorDash to make ends meet but didn't know how to pursue a career. His coach matched him with a six-month internship at Envision Technology Advisors, an employer partner who provided 250 hours of paid experiential learning, funded by the Governor's Workforce Board.

Although Elijah had strong technical skills, he needed intensive soft skill coaching. His coach maintained regular communication with his supervisor, helping him refine professional emails, verbal communication, and workplace demeanor. Despite not qualifying for WIOA due to his high testing scores and timing, he received consistent support through Foster Forward. Elijah completed the internship and was hired full-time as a Tech Advisor at a higher education institution. He now earns \$37,600 annually, with benefits and tuition remission for an associate's degree. He maintained stable housing, participated in our Youth Financial Wellness pilot, and enrolled in the Opportunity Passport™ asset-matching program, using matched funds to cover vehicle expenses including a \$500/month insurance payment. This is particularly significant, as there is no viable public transit route to his job, and research shows youth who match for vehicle-related expenses are 1.5x more likely to be employed.

Elijah's journey exemplifies what Works Wonders® is designed to do: create personalized, relationship-centered pathways to stability and self-sufficiency for youth transitioning out of care

or facing similar barriers. By embedding workforce development within a web of trust, accountability, and opportunity, the model reimagines what successful transition can look like.

Leveling the Playing Field: Employment Trends, Program Impact, and National Scalability of Works Wonders®

The Challenge:

Youth and young adults with foster care experience face steep, systemic barriers to employment—resulting in significantly lower employment rates than their peers.

Employment Rate Comparison (Ages 21–24)

Group	National Rate	Rhode Island Rate
General Population	~70% (BLS, 2024)	~68–70% (ACS, 2023)
Foster Youth	~50–55% (Chapin Hall, NYTD)	~45–55% (DCYF NYTD, RI Kids Count)

Youth in foster care are **15–20 percentage points less likely** to be employed than their peers.

What Drives the Gap?

- Disrupted education and lack of credentials
- Housing instability and unmet basic needs
- Unaddressed trauma and behavioral health challenges
- Limited networks and lack of exposure to careers

These compounding factors hinder access to entry-level jobs, career pathways, and economic mobility.

The Works Wonders® Response

Since 2016, the Works Wonders® program at Foster Forward has served nearly 800 youth (799 participants), providing access to personalized career pathways, soft skill development, and employer-connected experiences.

The program's impact is amplified by its deep integration with Foster Forward's housing, clinical, and financial coaching supports. In fact, 64% of participants also engage in one or more of Foster Forward's other 360-degree support programs, illustrating the power of a holistic approach.

2024 Program Outcomes:

- **160 youth enrolled** in the program year to date
- **93% (149 youth)** continued beyond initial E2 training
- **74% (111 youth)** achieved a positive outcome, including:
 - Internship placement
 - Enrollment in education or credentialing programs

- Employment

Employment Readiness at Entry:

- 26% had no prior work history
- 45% had some experience but were unemployed
- 29% were employed at program start

Growth Across Groups:

- Among those with no prior work experience:
 - 59% completed an internship
 - 28% secured their first job
- Youth with past experience saw:
 - **Average wage increase** from \$15.85 to \$16.27/hour
 - **Average hours worked** rose from 24 to 32/week

Education Pathways:

- 50% were in high school or working on a GED (many were older than typical grade level)
- 29% had completed high school but were not pursuing further education
 - Of those, **24% enrolled** in postsecondary or credentialing programs (especially in healthcare, human services, and hospitality)

Barrier Navigation:

- 46% of youth reported significant challenges, such as parenting or chronic health conditions
- 60% had experienced housing instability (e.g., couch surfing, shelter stays)

Experiential Learning:

- 104 experiential learning opportunities offered in 2024 alone
 - Averaged **100 hours** per participant
 - 78% hosted by **local employers**
 - 16% hosted by **national partners**

These placements provide critical work-based learning, community connections, and pathways to permanent employment.

Soft Skills & Confidence Gains:

- 76% reported improved teamwork
- 71% improved communication skills
- Awareness of job opportunities grew from 31% to 73%
- Time management understanding rose from 40% to 69%

These relational competencies: communication, adaptability, collaboration are essential in an evolving, AI-driven economy and align directly with employer needs. Elijah's story, shared earlier, is one example of how these wraparound strategies come together to help youth not only enter, but remain and grow in the workforce.

Scalability and National Replication

Between 2020 and 2023, **585 youth** were served across three replication sites, demonstrating that the Works Wonders® model is both adaptable and scalable.

Current Replication Sites:

- **Nashville, Tennessee** (*Monroe Harding*) Launched in 2019, supporting youth with site visits, employer exploration, and coaching
- **Indianapolis, Indiana** (*Foster Success*) Implemented since 2021, with over 85% of participants completing core program phases

Supports Provided to Partners include comprehensive implementation manual and fidelity tools, youth-facing curriculum and facilitator training, and ongoing technical assistance, evaluation, and learning community. This is not just program replication, it is a systems-level shift in how we equip transition-age youth for long-term economic stability, grounded in relationship, equity, and opportunity.

Conclusion

Too often, youth aging out of foster care are treated as an afterthought, expected to navigate adult responsibilities without the preparation, resources, or relationships their peers rely on. But we know that with the right support in place, these young people don't just survive, they thrive. The Works Wonders® model offers a clear, proven example of what it takes to level the playing field for transition-age youth. It meets foster youth where they are, with relationship-centered coaching, peer support, housing stability, and experiential learning that builds both technical and human-centered skills. Our data shows real, measurable results: increased employment, improved wages, higher educational engagement, and better outcomes for youth with significant barriers.

This work is scalable. It's already happening in Rhode Island, Indiana, and Tennessee. It is driven by youth voice, strengthened by employer partnerships, and supported by strategic alignment with existing federal programs like WIOA, Chafee, and FYI vouchers. What we need now is the will and the policy flexibility to take what's working and build on it nationally.

As members of the Committee consider how to reimagine success for youth leaving foster care, there is an opportunity to act on what's already in motion:

- Several members have championed workforce innovation and improved outcomes for disconnected youth. Aligning those efforts with targeted supports for foster youth would strengthen results and close equity gaps.

- Provisions within WIOA and Chafee could be modernized, not by reinventing the wheel, but by removing barriers and unlocking the full potential of these programs to support young people aging out of care.
- Emerging bipartisan interest in apprenticeship pathways, housing stability, and mental health for youth creates a meaningful window to integrate foster youth considerations into broader legislation.

I invite the Committee to continue this momentum and to ensure that no young person is forced to age out without a plan. Foster youth deserve real opportunity, not just resilience. Thank you for this incredible opportunity to share our work. I welcome your questions and look forward to being a resource as this conversation moves forward.