

Written Testimony of Lasheunda Carr, MPA
Before the U.S. House of Representatives House Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare
Leaving the Sticky Notes Behind: Harnessing Innovation and New Technology to
Help America's Foster Youth Succeed
November 18, 2025

Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and all members of this committee, thank you for the invitation to testify on this important conversation addressing innovation and technology for achieving success for older foster youth.

My name is Lasheunda Carr, and I'm a lifelong Chicago resident with a bachelor's degree from Western Illinois University and a master's in public administration from Grand Canyon University. I'm also a wife and mother of three boys.

For the past nine years, I've worked at Lawrence Hall, a community-based service agency committed to helping heal the effects of childhood trauma and empowering youth for 160 years. For the last five years, I have been able to incorporate Youth Villages' LifeSet program model into my work.

Growing up in Chicago, I saw firsthand the challenges young people face, especially when they lack stability. Two people close to me, a high school friend and my brother, experienced significant instability after losing their caregivers. Watching them navigate life without permanency is what led me into social services. Their experiences inspired my commitment to making sure no young person has to go through that alone. LifeSet has allowed me to turn that commitment into meaningful impact, which is why I'm excited about the opportunity to talk to you today about the work we do and the young people we serve.

Every year about 16,000 young people age out of foster care, usually at age 18. These are the children our child welfare systems have failed. They were never reunited with their biological families or adopted. Like all young people, those who have experienced foster care have huge potential, but without support, they struggle to overcome childhood adversity in the critical young adult years. We all know the statistics: homelessness, mental and physical health problems, lower education achievement, under employment.

LifeSet was developed by Youth Villages in 1999 to change those statistics. It was sustained and scaled through public/private partnerships, leveraging significant philanthropic support. 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 the foster care system.

LifeSet is an intensive, community-based program that acts as a bridge from foster care to successful adulthood. If you think of it as a bridge, its spans – the things we specialists work on with young people – include permanent relationships, housing, mental and physical health, career and employment, education and life skills. These are all the things that all of our young people need help with as they turn 18. If you have a young adult in your family, you know this in a personal way.

Youth Villages provides LifeSet directly through its own staff and also trains and supports other public and private agencies, such as Lawrence Hall in Chicago, Illinois. Lawrence Hall is one of five child-welfare service providers in the state that use the LifeSet model to support young people aging out of foster care.

From its development and launch in Memphis 26 years ago -- with the support of one committed donor -- the LifeSet model has grown to become the largest program helping young adults leaving foster care or state custody in the country and one of the only to have proven positive outcomes in a large randomized clinical trial. Last year, more than 8,000 young adults got a good start to adulthood by being a part of the LifeSet program. It is a comprehensive, evidence-based program model, promoting well-being and stabilizing even the toughest situations. The support the program gives allows young people to rise up, identify their own goals and achieve them.

My nonprofit organization, Lawrence Hall, became an implementing partner in fiscal year 2020 and now serves about 50 Chicago young people in the program every day. I have an average of eight young people on my caseload. I meet with them face-to-face once each week, and we keep in constant touch by text and phone between meetings. Just like you do with your young adult children. Instead of a text when they need help with something to dad or mom, they send one to me.

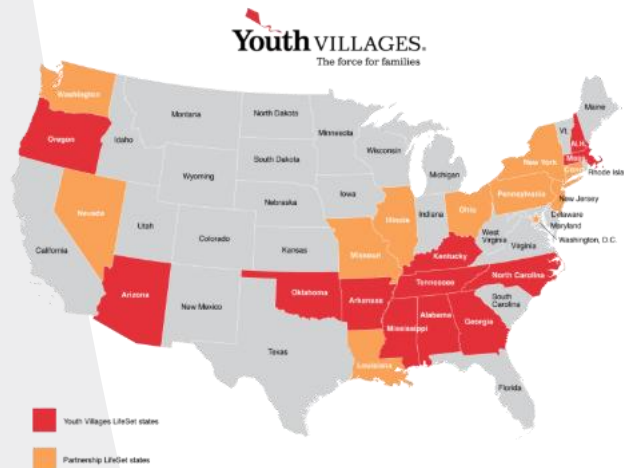
A recurring challenge among transition-age foster youth is their hesitation to engage with services due to the persistent turnover of professionals in their lives. Many have experienced years of instability, which can lead them to rely on negative peer groups that appear more consistent than the formal support systems intended to help them. As a result, I place significant emphasis on providing steady, reliable engagement. Because LifeSet is comprehensive, we can help young people with very complex needs – in many of the areas of their lives.

One example involves a young man with untreated diabetes, identified mental health needs, and minimal support from family or friends, all of which increased his vulnerability to high-risk behavior. Through consistent contact and implementation of the LifeSet model, we were able to stabilize his living situation, strengthen his relationship with his father, support his completion of high school and ensure proper management of his diabetes. He's continuing to do well as an adult.

This case illustrates the core needs we regularly observe: the need for access to mental health services, stable housing, educational support and the presence of dependable adults who consistently follow through.

Youth Villages has made an organizational commitment to see that all young people aging out of foster care each year have the opportunities and resources they need to be successful as adults.

Since 1999, LifeSet has expanded its reach, it is currently delivered in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Washington, and the District of Columbia. In all, Youth Villages serves more than 4,000 young people daily through intensive case management services, extended foster care or the LifeSet program.



Young people who have experienced foster care have so much potential, but without support in their teens or early twenties, may struggle to successfully transition into adulthood, especially when working to overcome childhood adversity. The LifeSet program serves young people ages 17 to 23, providing intensive, individualized support through weekly in-person meetings between participants and trained LifeSet specialists. Meetings take place in community settings, such as the young adult's home, workplace, or another location that is most comfortable and convenient for them. In addition to these scheduled sessions, participants have 24/7 access to their LifeSet specialist for support in times of need.

Enrollment in LifeSet typically spans nine months, during which specialists help youth set and achieve personal goals related to education, employment, housing, and overall well-being.



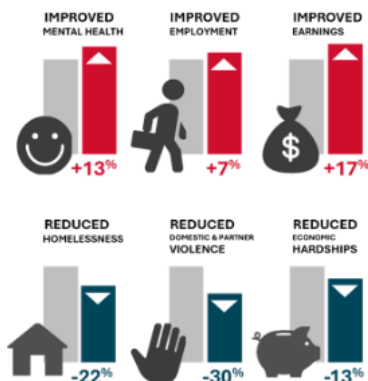
The LifeSet program is supported by three key staff roles:

1. **LifeSet specialists** work directly with 8–10 young adults at a time. They hold either a master’s degree in a relevant field or a bachelor’s degree combined with related work experience.
2. **Team supervisors** oversee up to four specialists. They hold a master’s degree in a relevant field or a bachelor’s degree with relevant experience. Their responsibilities include leading group and individual supervision, conducting field supervision, and developing and monitoring professional growth plans for team members.
3. **Licensed program experts (LPE)** ensure fidelity to the LifeSet model and provide clinical guidance to four or five LifeSet teams. They typically have prior experience as both a LifeSet specialist and supervisor and hold a master’s degree and a professional license in a social service discipline.

An Evaluation of LifeSet’s Impact on Youth Outcomes

LifeSet 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 and safety outcomes.

IN A LARGE RANDOMIZED TRIAL, LEADING SOCIAL RESEARCH FIRM MDRC FOUND THAT YOUNG PEOPLE WHO RECEIVED LIFESET HAD POSITIVE OUTCOMES INCLUDING:



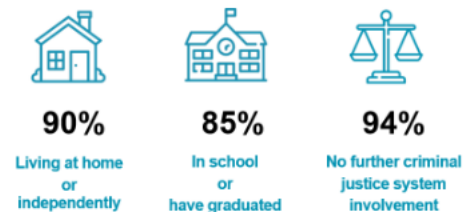
In 2015, the LifeSet program was evaluated by MDRC, a leading national research organization, in a large randomized control trial that analyzed the program’s impacts in the six domains that it was designed to affect: education; employment and earnings; housing stability and economic well-being; social support; health and safety; and criminal involvement. The study found that LifeSet increased employment and earnings, reduced housing instability and economic hardships, and improved some outcomes related to health and safety one-year post-enrollment. However, no impact was found on outcomes in the areas of education, social support, or criminal involvement.

In 2022, the LifeSet program's implementation in Illinois was evaluated by Chapin Hall. A randomized clinical trial of the program is underway in New Jersey with the evaluation being conducted by the Child Welfare Evidence Strengthening Team (CWEST) at the Urban Institute focusing on youth and young adults leaving foster care in that state.

In addition, since 1999, Youth Villages has collected LifeSet outcome data for young people at discharge and one-year post-discharge. The graphic to the right shows the last two fiscal years outcomes data one year post discharge. Measuring impact is essential.

In 2025, over 8,700 transition-age youth were served through LifeSet in 21 states and the District of Columbia and the following metrics are true:

- 90% of LifeSet youth living independently or with family
- 85% of LifeSet youth in school, graduated, or employed
- 94% of LifeSet youth experiencing “no trouble with law”



Youth Villages national LifeSet data: FY23-FY25.

Strengthening the Human Services Workforce: Overview of GuideTree[®]

LifeSet specialists use **GuideTree[®]**, a workforce training and development approach developed by Youth Villages that combines effective conceptualization methods and structured guidance with curated, evidence-based resources. It offers staff a roadmap to analyzing cases, choosing effective interventions, and providing more consistent, high-quality care to young people and their families.

What sets it apart:

- **A dynamic knowledge hub, not a course.** Real-time, searchable, credible resources staff can use immediately.
- **Meaningful support that drives staff competence.** Moves case supervision from compliance to active coaching; one of the few levers agencies can pull to engage staff.
- **Evidence-informed and measurable.** Progress is tracked through metrics and milestones.
- **Proven in pilots.** Early results indicate improved staff confidence, a reduction in serious incidents, enhanced service planning, and increased job satisfaction.

Youth Villages has partnered with FindHelp and Netsmart, FindHelp's exclusive partner, to gain permission to have a zip code widget on the GuideTree home page for specialists to search for local resources via FindHelp to support their work with young people. This innovation allows specialists to provide immediate concrete support for a variety of resources to include, but not limited to, food security, housing, educational options, and

mental health needs. From the widget, specialists can support young adults in accessing community resources within their zip code and to schedule appointments with care providers directly from the platform.

Strengthening Support for Young People: Chafee's Impact and Future Policy

Federal legislation like the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was a major step forward in helping young people 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 education, employment, financial, and housing support. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provided federal matching funds for states to support children in foster care until age 21, and in 2018 with the passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act until age 23. However, the eligibility criteria for Chafee-funded services still vary widely by state and the program has not kept up with inflation or the increase in the eligibility of the population. Combined with Chafee, passage of additional legislation is an opportunity for states to receive federal reimbursement for robust, evidence-based programs and services, like LifeSet.

Public and private investments have allowed Youth Villages to help many more states and localities expand services, unlock federal match funding, and create or improve extended care systems faster and with more sustainable scale.

LifeSet is funded differently in each state; some states use Chafee funding with other funding streams, but no state has fully funded the program with Chafee or child welfare funding solely. 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 for LifeSet is used in Connecticut, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia.

Federal Chafee and ETV programs are essential lifelines for foster youth, but often underutilized due to administrative complexity, not a lack of need. In order to intervene at critical juncture to change the trajectory of young people lives and to maximize the impact of the Chafee funding stream, it is essential to: fund innovation, grow promising practices and create a robust evidence-base of what works for improving the outcomes of transition-age foster youth. Given that Chafee has been funding a wide variety of programs for 25 years, and that we now have a small body of research to draw from, it is an ideal time to apply what we have learned and accelerate the growth of effective practices and services.

Specialists are trained to help young people access the resources they need to set and achieve their own goals. The program is designed to meet the case management criteria and can be implemented alongside extended foster care and adapted to meet jurisdiction-specific requirements.

Understanding the Core Components of LifeSet

The LifeSet program is distinguished from traditional transitional and independent living programs by the level of staff training and supervision it provides and the frequency and intensity of engagement with participating youth. LifeSet specialists meet with youth weekly to deliver individualized, goal-oriented services that support progress in areas such as housing, employment, education, and financial management. Specialists also help youth strengthen and maintain healthy family and social relationships, as appropriate.

Youth agency is a core principle of the LifeSet model. Participants voluntarily opt into the program, choose their living arrangements, select the goals they wish to pursue, and determine the strategies to achieve those goals. In focus groups, young adults reported that LifeSet is more responsive to their needs and priorities than other programs. They described it as a program that “listens to them,” particularly regarding case planning and goal setting.

Supervisors and program administrators consistently described LifeSet services as “intentional,” highlighting the deliberate and structured nature of the program’s approach. They noted that LifeSet provides a range of supports not typically available to traditional case managers, including access to GuideTree, clinical consultation, and specialized training. Staff emphasized that LifeSet’s scope, flexibility, structured model, and higher frequency of communication with young adults are defining characteristics that set it apart from standard service models.

Whereas many traditional programs focus on only one or two domains of independent living, LifeSet provides comprehensive support across multiple areas, allowing for a more holistic and individualized approach to helping young adults transition successfully to independence.

Youth Villages flexible format makes it easy to integrate LifeSet into a state’s existing service array or as a stand-alone program. Here is how LifeSet is implemented in some of the states:

- Arizona: LifeSet is used to prepare young people for extended foster care (EFC) and/or for young people living in variety of placement settings.
- Illinois: LifeSet is integrated for staff providing case management for young people in a variety of housing settings managed by private agencies.
- Louisiana: LifeSet is the case management model for extended foster care (EFC) implemented by the public agencies staff.
- New Jersey: Private providers with aftercare contracts with the state implement LifeSet to support young people in extended foster care in addition to providing case management services.
- Oklahoma: LifeSet is a Chafee eligible service to prepare young people aging out prepare for transitioning plans or goals.
- Tennessee: LifeSet is offered to all eligible young people to support them as they prepare for adulthood and for those who are preparing for extended foster care (EFC).

LifeSet Implementation: Required Federal and State Investments

The investment required to implement the LifeSet model varies state by state, with the primary cost drivers being staff salaries and gas mileage for in-person sessions. On average, the cost per young adult participating in LifeSet ranges from \$15,000 to \$20,000. While this represents a meaningful investment for the public, the savings to society are far greater. Each year, the nation incurs an estimated \$4.1 billion in costs associated with negative outcomes experienced by young people exiting foster care.

The return on investment (ROI) for LifeSet extends well beyond immediate cost savings. Youth who participate in LifeSet demonstrate increased employment and earnings, reduced homelessness and couch-surfing, fewer experiences of economic hardship, and measurable improvements in mental health. Participants also experience reductions in partner violence, contributing to greater long-term stability and safety.

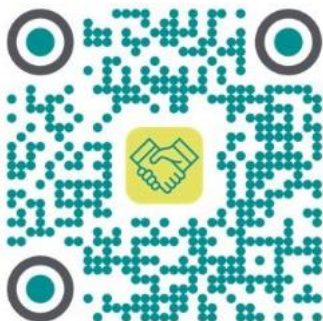
In short, the investment in LifeSet not only improves the lives of young people transitioning from foster care—it also delivers substantial social and economic returns for communities and states.

Consideration for Congress

To better serve young people aging out of foster care, we respectfully urge Congress to consider the following improvements to the Chafee Program:

1. Simplify application and reporting requirements to reduce administrative burden and delays.
2. Increase funding levels and allow for inflation adjustments.
3. Ensure alignment with real-life needs, including housing, transportation, and mental health support.
4. Extend expenditure timelines to allow states to plan, adapt, and maximize impact.
5. Clarify that unspent funds do not equate to lack of need but rather highlight structural and implementation barriers.
6. Focus on investing and requiring the implementation of evidence-based practices and programs to meet the needs of young adults aging out of foster care

Read the Playbook:



I would like to also share a new resource that was recently published by the National Collaborative for Transition-Age Youth, [*Improving Outcomes for Young Adults and the Systems that Serve Them: A Playbook of Best Practices*](#). This playbook was co-designed with young people with lived experience in foster care to be a road map for child welfare agencies, policymakers and advocates who are committed to improving outcomes for young people who turn 18 in foster care. The playbook provides a framework for advancing outcomes across key domains including housing, health, education, employment and permanency.

Conclusion

For more than a decade, our vision has remained clear: to ensure that every young adult aging out of foster care, or on track to age out, has the opportunity, skills, and resources needed to achieve a successful transition to adulthood. The LifeSet model is uniquely designed to support this vision. It empowers young people to take the lead in setting and achieving their own goals while providing consistent, individualized guidance from trained specialists. Through LifeSet, participants are supported in maintaining stable housing, avoiding justice system involvement, pursuing education and employment opportunities, and developing essential life skills for independence.

While both federal and state governments have made important strides in investing in and prioritizing the needs of young people with foster care experience, few programs have undergone the same level of rigorous evaluation as LifeSet, or demonstrated comparable, measurable improvements in outcomes. Thank you for your continued commitment to supporting young people transitioning from foster care. I appreciate the opportunity to share this information and look forward to your questions.