

Testimony of Michael Leach, Think of Us
Before the 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"
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Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Michael Leach, and I serve as the Chief External Engagement Officer at Think of Us, a national nonprofit organization focused on transforming child welfare and improving outcomes for young people and families who are touched by the system. For more than two decades now, I have worked at every level of this system, and I have seen the promise and the pain of what it has to offer. I have seen dedicated caseworkers blocked by unnecessary bureaucracy from doing what they know is right. I have watched outdated technology and inability to prioritize change widen the gap between what youth need and what we deliver. And I have had the privilege of speaking directly with countless young people who have taught me what thriving actually requires.

My career began not in an office, but in living rooms, jails, emergency departments, and residential facilities, sitting across from young people who had been told directly or indirectly that they were on their own or struggling with their trauma. I led Tennessee's Independent Living program and later served as Deputy Commissioner with responsibility for foster care, adoption, independent living, and all child welfare programs. In these roles, I worked to strengthen extended foster care, expand housing options, and strengthen partnerships with schools and employers.

Later, as Director of South Carolina's Department of Social Services for five and a half years, I was privileged to lead efforts that decreased the foster care population from 6,000 to 3,000 by focusing on child safety, prevention services, and increased post adoption services. We increased kinship placements from 3% to over 29%, reduced staff turnover to under 10%, decreased overreliance on congregate care, and, crucially, set new records for the number of teenagers being adopted within the state every year.

These experiences taught me something fundamental: technology matters, policy tweaks matter, but what matters most is whether we are building a system designed around what young people actually need.

And what young people need is clear. They need family. They need to be surrounded by a community that cares for them. They need to be loved and to know they belong. And they need to know that love and belonging is forever. The number one thing that predicts a youth's success is being loved and knowing they will continue to be loved. *You cannot build adulthood through curriculum or services or innovative technology. You build it through relationships, and there are ways to redesign public policy to make supporting relationships the most likely outcome.*

What Independent Living Work Taught Me

What independent living work truly taught me is that "independent living" is a misnomer. None of us live independently. A system that truly serves older youth in care is one of healthy interdependence. One that is focused on providing young people the lifelong sense of love and belonging that they need to heal.

In Tennessee, I inherited an incredible team of Independent Living specialists stationed in every region. Their entire job was to help young people prepare for adulthood, to develop life skills, plan for housing, connect to employment, and imagine a future beyond 18. They always focused on the long-term view: not just getting a young person to 18, but preparing them to thrive at 25.

I loved that work. I loved listening to youth boards in Nashville, Knoxville, and Memphis. I learned more from those young people than from any policy manual or federal regulation I ever read. They would tell me the same things again and again: *“Listen to us. Care about us. Believe in us. Give us hope.”*

And they were right, because child welfare is not just a ledger of services. It is not a checklist of skill-building classes. Young people outside the system get their life skills from the adults in their lives: their families, their neighbors, their communities. Our youth don't get that naturally. And we continue to pretend that they can gain it through a class or a packet or a few hours of training.

This brings me to an essential issue: Outside the system, young adults are living with family longer than ever due to housing costs and economic stress. Yet for youth in foster care, we still expect them to leap into adulthood alone on the stroke of their eighteenth birthday. Given current economic realities—rising costs of housing, groceries, and healthcare—this expectation has become even more unrealistic.

Why Tweaks Aren't Enough: The Case for Transformational Change

Today's hearing focuses on technology and the Chafee program, and those are important, laudable topics, but I want to be very direct: There are things technology can do, but it cannot replace the need for broad, systemic reforms. There are tweaks that need to be made to Chafee, but they don't erase the need for transformational change.

I started doing this work more than two decades ago. We are still seeing the same outcomes. Nationally, we do not see consistent improvement in key outcomes like homelessness, incarceration, education, employment, or economic stability. Some states show modest gains for youth who receive extended supports, but there is no clear nationwide pattern of better results for most young people aging out.

Think of Us started as a tech nonprofit, and we are dedicated to technology in this space, to leveraging AI to make casework better, to streamline processes, and to help young people navigate the system. But over the last ten years and the more than 50,000 young people that we've worked with, it became clear that technology alone will not deliver the system we need. Think of Us shifted to being a system change organization because we saw we won't solve the underlying structural problems that are leading us to fail older youth in care by layering technology on top of them.

We can tweak Chafee for another decade and still get the exact same outcomes for youth. This is not a failure of effort. People are trying. Frontline workers care deeply. But the system itself is designed to produce the outcomes we are currently seeing. And that means the system itself must change.

Getting past the same outcomes that we've been seeing for my whole career means broadly rethinking how our systems are serving youth. We can envision a world in which technology helps to streamline paperwork for caseworkers, and that's great, but that doesn't change the fact that their days are bound by compliance to well-meaning but onerous rules and not by what is right for children. We can make tweaks

to Chafee to allow new technology-driven training methods, but that doesn't change the fact that healthy, thriving adulthood is built through relationships, not curriculum.

A Transformative Vision for Older Youth

When the government decides to remove a young person from their home, the system takes on the role of being a responsible parent. The system cannot love children, but it can ensure that young people are surrounded by loving adults who support them as they transition to adulthood. It must be the expectation that young people in foster care receive the same types and levels of support that we would expect any loving parent to provide. We can't think of these young people as anything other than our own kids.

I've seen how resilient young people can survive when the system provides them resources after they age out on their own. But young people *thrive* when they get resources within their family—with kin, with an adoptive family, with people who love them unconditionally.

The big picture comes down to three fundamental principles:

Family and a sense of belonging that lasts forever. The fundamental building block of all well-being is family, the felt safety and security that comes with knowing you belong somewhere and that belonging is lifelong. The system has sacred responsibility to ensure every child is safe and loved within a family that cares for them and supports them. Unconditional love is essential for the development of identity and self. It creates the security that allows young people to try and fail, to take risks and learn, knowing they will still be loved and cared for. That is what family provides. That is what every young person deserves.

The opportunity to heal from trauma. Developmental science shows us that relationships are the core protective factor against toxic stress and trauma. And when young people have experienced trauma, we know that they heal and develop in the context of strong relationships. You cannot heal alone. You heal in community, in family. A healing-centered approach empowers young people to move beyond their trauma, not by fixing them, but by surrounding them with people who love them and support their journey. Without the chance to heal from their trauma, youth cannot thrive into adulthood.

Stability in their lives. Young people need a world they can count on, where they can focus on developing, growing, and learning without fear that everything will be ripped out from under them. Stability creates the foundation that allows young people to try new things, build relationships, and develop their skills. It allows them to take the developmental risks that growth requires—trying, failing, and trying again—knowing that their world will still be there. Without stability, young people are in survival mode. With it, they can thrive.

A lifelong sense of belonging, the support to heal from trauma, and the stability to develop. My two decades in this field, the science of brain development, and the voices of thousands of young people converge on the same conclusion: when youth have these things, the rest falls into place.

What the Research Tells Us

Every study, every youth panel, every national report has told us the same thing: the strongest predictor of success is a connected, caring adult. Someone who shows up. Someone who pushes, praises, corrects, celebrates, and stays. A mentor. A coach. A relative. A trusted adult. A kinship, foster, or adoptive parent.

For so long, the data we've been asked to report to the federal government has asked whether young people have one adult they can count on. A single adult is not something any of us would accept for our own kids. Young adults need an entire village.

What Does That Actually Look Like?

Start with prevention and entry into the system.

There is a myth that most children who age out of the system have been in foster care for 15 years by the time they reach adulthood. That wasn't true in South Carolina or Tennessee, and it isn't true across the country. Those cases exist. They shouldn't, but they do. But the vast majority of young people who age out of foster care were 13 years or older when they entered care.

And teens come in for very different reasons than young children. Many come in because parents and young people cannot coexist peacefully, because the young person is considered unmanageable by their parent or because they've tried everything they can to provide the care needed for a youth who is struggling, but they've given up hope. These are situations that are better addressed with support than separation. I've seen time and again that the best way to prevent a young person from aging out is preventing them from entering care in the first place.

Earlier this year, HHS released a report documenting the staggering number of children who enter foster care through relinquishment. It found that, nationally, relinquishment accounted for roughly 5% of entries, but accounted for roughly 18% of entries for youth ages 13-17. Parents facing mental and behavioral health needs they cannot meet in their communities make the agonizing choice to give up children they love because it is the only way to get them help. The services only exist in the system.

That should never happen. It is a policy and practice failure to separate children from families that love them because that's the only way for them to get help. More than that, it is a moral failure.

The best thing we can do for children's futures is disrupt this pipeline and get them the support they need in their communities so they never enter care in the first place. That means mental and behavioral health care available in the community. Family acceptance and crisis stabilization programs. Support services for adolescent substance use. Supports that help communities wrap around children before crisis hits.

For each individual child that we can stabilize and keep at home safely, their outcomes will be better if they can remain with family. It's also better for the system, because limited resources can be focused on only the youth who absolutely need to be in the system.

This is fundamentally relational work, but technology has an important role to play here. Innovative technology can help identify families that need support, help struggling parents navigate services, or wrap communities around families so they remain stable even after the child welfare system walks away.

When youth do enter care, focus on the relationships that create belonging.

That starts with preserving the relationships they already have. Kin finding, with broad definitions of kin that include all emotionally significant people in a child's life—relatives, coaches, neighbors, their faith community—is critical. When a child cannot be with their parents, their kin are the next best chance they have for unconditional love.

We continue to see innovation in this space. However, because of burdens placed on the system, we often only see kin as potential placements. But for youth outside of foster care, kin play important roles beyond placement. This should be true within the system. Kin can be loving family members, trusted confidants, mentors. And they can be a support to stabilize the family, providing respite care, driving children to activities, helping with appointments. They help give young people the sense of belonging they need.

We must look closely at what disincentives exist that prevent caseworkers from facilitating relationships or that tie up their time in compliance, rather than preserving youth's relationships and facilitating new ones. We must redefine relationship building as a key role for all child welfare professionals.

Technology is already playing an important role in this space, supporting the identification of kin, but often this application of technology stops at placement. We must envision a world in which caseworkers, supported by technology, focus consistently on identification of kin throughout the life of a case, coordinating connections, and facilitating strong relationships with kin who don't live nearby. This is human, relational work, but, aided by technology, it can be deepened.

Provide the stability that allows healing and development.

Stability gives young people the opportunity for normative experiences that help them build new relationships and develop their skills in the context of family and community.

Understanding that young people need time to develop, this stability should continue as they grow. That means extending foster care to 23 like in Idaho and Tennessee or even later to match the developmental timelines we know from research rather than arbitrary age cutoffs. To avoid benefit cliffs, extended foster care should taper, giving youth a smooth runway into adulthood rather than cutting them off abruptly.

We hear over and over about teens bouncing between different foster homes. This is often due to mental and behavioral health challenges stemming from trauma they have experienced, and that trauma is compounded every time they have to move to another placement. These are young people who end up in congregate care, removed from community, too often harmed. But here is what we need to understand: foster parents don't give up on kids because they don't care about them. They give up because they don't feel they can provide the care young people need.

Parenting a teenager is hard for anyone. It is much more difficult when you have to help a young person navigate their trauma and the developmentally appropriate behavioral challenges that come with it. If we want young people to have stability, we need to focus on supporting caregivers and ensuring they have not just the resources but the skills they need to parent teens with trauma.

That means investing in therapeutic foster and kinship care. It means treating caregivers as valuable partners in the work. It means ensuring caregivers have access to respite when they need a break. It means giving them a person they can turn to when things get hard, someone who can coach them through the difficult moments. It means providing trainings that prepare them for the realities of parenting a teen who has experienced trauma.

When caregivers feel supported and equipped, they can stay. When they stay, young people get the stability they need to heal and develop.

Caregivers who stay with a young person while they are in care often continue supporting them in new and different ways after they age out. This matters enormously. The transition to adulthood is challenging on every level: navigating the job market, obtaining housing, building credit. Young people without credit history need cosigners. Without family to turn to, they're forced to put up several months of rent they don't have, or they end up couch-surfing or in unsafe housing with exploitative landlords. Caregivers who build lasting bonds are willing to cosign leases, help navigate voucher systems, and protect young people from being taken advantage of. That support is the difference between stable housing and homelessness.

Technology can play an important role in connecting young people to services, facilitating new therapeutics, and helping to identify problems before they become crises. It can also support caregivers themselves, providing access to training, connecting them with peer support networks, and offering tools that help them navigate challenging moments. But this is still fundamentally relational work.

Support development in the context of relationships.

When young people have stability and know they are loved, they can learn and grow the way all children do: through experience, through trial and error, through relationships.

How do you build life skills? You build them with family. How do you learn to drive, understand banking, manage money? You learn that in your community. Classes and programs exist—youth who aren't in foster care go to classes, too, and those programs aren't just about skills. They offer youth another way to build community. Still, those classes only complement the core of life skills development, which comes from within family, from connected, caring adults who stay.

This is about creating opportunities for youth to learn experientially. When youth know they are stable and loved, they can try and fail because they know they have people to turn to. They can take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them—because that's how development actually happens.

There will always be a space for training courses that impart life skills, and they have value, particularly in the context of specialized case management. At Think of Us, we are particularly concerned with how we prepare young people for the skills to navigate a rapidly evolving digital world, leveraging partnerships in the private sector and allowing the flexibility to prepare youth for the jobs of the future. But those programs work best when they complement—not replace—the foundational learning that happens within relationships, in communities, with family.

Technology can support this with training modalities that allow youth to learn alongside the adults in their lives, with tools that help caseworkers monitor and benchmark youth's skill building along a developmental curve. But again, technology serves the relationship. It doesn't substitute for it.

Drive toward permanency for every single youth.

The ultimate goal for youth in foster care is reunification when that is safe and possible. But when reunification isn't possible, we must focus on ensuring that the right legal and relational permanency options are available for each individual youth and that we never stop driving toward permanency.

For many youth, that is adoption. For others, guardianship is the right option. Think of Us has been a major proponent of the SOUL Family option, in which young people select their own network of

permanent legal connections. We should not be incentivizing one form of permanency over others. The goal is to ensure that the right pathways exist for every single child to find lifelong belonging.

That means removing disincentives for permanency by ensuring that when young people are adopted, enter guardianships, or reunify, they receive the same supports they would receive if they aged out. Young people should never be left with the agonizing choice between a forever family and the ability to pay for college or keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

The work of facilitating reunification, adoption, and guardianship and of supporting families post-permanency so they remain together is fundamentally relational, but there is a critical role of technology. Some of this technology already exists, and some of it still needs to be built. AI tools can begin analyzing case notes and timelines to suggest permanency pathways, but deeper integration of youth preferences and relational networks will require new development. And while pieces of a post-permanency benefits system exist, the full vision will need intentional investment to become real.

Technology in Service to Vision

My colleagues on the panel offer important technology solutions, and there are countless other technology innovations in the field that provide substantial value. We should absolutely utilize these tools and continue to build new ones. But we have to remember that any technology advancements must be in service to the foundational principles that young people need: a sense of belonging that lasts forever, the ability to heal from trauma, and stability in their lives.

Technology can support relationship building, but it cannot replace relationships. It can facilitate connections, but it cannot create the unconditional love that young people need to thrive. As we consider innovations in this space, we must always ask: does this serve the vision of surrounding young people with people who love them and will stay? If the answer is yes, then we should embrace it fully. If the answer is anything less, then we need to refocus our efforts on what actually works. And we must never let the promise of a shiny new technology distract us from the difficult, necessary work of reforming and reshaping the system to be the ideal young people need.

No single piece of technology will ever be a silver bullet for the ills of the system or unlock relationships for every child. Child welfare leaders face the unenviable task of balancing competing priorities with limited resources, determining which tools provide genuine benefit without draining the time, funding, and energy needed for the relational work that matters most.

The Daily Realities of the System

I want to tell you about a young woman I'll call Jasmine. She had spent most of her adolescence bouncing between group homes. She was bright, determined, and angry in ways that made sense for everything she had been through. At nineteen, she was living in a transitional apartment and wanted to go to cosmetology school, but she couldn't get the tuition deposit in time. Because she reached adulthood without a community of supportive, loving relationships, she had no one to lend her the money.

Her caseworker asked whether we could use Chafee funds for the deposit. The answer, according to our fiscal and federal guidance teams, was no, not unless it fit into a defined category. But it didn't fit. So we

did what so many states do: we hesitated, we sent an email, we asked for clarification, and weeks passed while Jasmine lost her spot in the program.

The core problem was this: Even when intent is good and dollars exist, the structure is so rigid that following through becomes almost impossible. It wasn't that people didn't care. They did. But rules, interpretations, and fear of audit findings stopped us from acting at the speed of life.

Funding Structure Misalignment

Let me be honest with you: the federal funding structure is not aligned with the lived realities of the young people we serve. The allocation hasn't kept pace with inflation or the complexity of need:

- Chafee funding has stayed essentially flat since 1999, with no adjustment for rising cost of living or the expanded population it is now meant to serve. To keep pace with inflation, the \$140 million Congress first appropriated would have to be more than \$270 million today. Instead, it is \$143 million, and the population Chafee is meant to serve has been expanded multiple times.
- Education and Training Vouchers remain capped at \$5,000 per youth—the same as in 2001—while tuition and the attendant costs of housing, food, books and more rise every year. Further, young people like Jasmine are unable to use ETV because many training, certification, and apprenticeship programs are ineligible under federal requirements.

Bureaucratic Barriers That Impede "Speed of Life" Decisions

Because of excessive bureaucracy, audits, and restrictive rules, states struggle to get money out the door when it matters most—in crisis, in urgency, in the moment a young person is about to lose housing or needs to cover tuition or utilities. Rules, interpretations, and "audit anxiety" create delays. Eligibility rules, timelines, and procurement complexity lead to unspent funds and slow delivery. States routinely return unspent Chafee and ETV funds, not because they don't care, but because the system is too rigid and disconnected. When a youth is facing eviction, losing transportation, or dropping out of school, delays create preventable harm.

The same rigidity shows up in extended foster care programs, with court oversight standards that prioritize financial compliance over the well-being of young people. I remember a young woman whose mental health needs became so severe that she could not comply with all the regulations required to stay in the program. Her team had to say, "We're going to help you get your needs met, but you're not fulfilling the required end of the bargain technically, and we have to let you go." I remember young people in their first year of college who struggle that first semester, get put on probation for the second semester, don't make it to class, and blow out. They're not in a secondary program. They're not in a work program. And we lose them at that point.

I hate that. These are young people we want to get back into the program to be able to support. But the regulations won't let us. We are forcing young people to choose between the support they desperately need and compliance with rules that don't account for the reality of trauma, mental health struggles, and the messy process of growing up. No parent would give up on their child because they failed a semester of college or struggled with their mental health. But the system does, because the rules demand it.

Service Access Failures

In a given year, fewer than one in four eligible youth receive a Chafee service, and just under half ever receive a single service between 14 and 21. Services are too inaccessible, and too many young people tell us that they left care without ever knowing what they were eligible for, learning too late about the services and supports that could have eased their transition to adulthood. When we think about areas that are ripe for technology solutions, this is one.

Young people in foster care are growing up in an inherently digital world, but forced to work through a system that is frustratingly analog. A modernized child welfare system can offer a single digital doorway integrating Chafee, housing, education, and workforce development, as well as crisis support when they can't afford their grocery bill or their student loans. It could give youth the opportunity to apply once and access multiple supports through a single platform, to see their case plans, communicate with workers, receive notifications about supports, and access all personal documents.

And these needs extend even once young people are out of care. Think of Us' Virtual Support Services program attempts to address by streamlining access to community-based services. Our community responders—assisted by ever-evolving technology—help youth exiting foster care navigate the different resources already available in their communities. We see this work as a powerful complement to the Chafee program, providing prompt, personalized support to youth as they transition to adulthood, but in most communities across the country, no such support is available.

Systems Not Working Together

Child welfare cannot do this alone. Education, housing, behavioral health, workforce, and homelessness systems must share responsibility for outcomes, yet we have not created the structures or incentives to facilitate these systems to prioritize youth leaving foster care. They become "just another client" in each silo, and that failure costs them futures. This is not waste. This is design failure.

By creating shared outcome accountability across agencies and asking states to demonstrate cross-system coordination, we can streamline processes to ensure access to housing supports, help more young people enroll in higher education, utilize job placement and apprenticeship services, and access healthcare.

Technology Failures Compound the Problem

Technology systems in child welfare are outdated, fragmented, incompatible, and inefficient. Caseworkers and Independent Living specialists work days, nights, weekends—because this work never stops—but they are using systems that belong in another decade. When I was director, I received weekly requests from lobbyists and vendors wanting to pitch innovative technologies. Some of it was interesting and potentially useful, but I still had basic child welfare gaps and real needs for more services directly to families. I knew that no piece of technology, no matter how miraculous it sounded, could replace my dedicated casework staff. Even though I knew we needed new tools, I also knew that every dollar I allocated toward a new piece of technology was one I couldn't spend on services for youth and families, increased board rates for foster parents, or additional staff to meet caseload standards. And we didn't have dollars to spare.

Meanwhile, the core tools our workforce relied on were broken and couldn't keep up with new laws, regulations, or technology. You cannot build a modern system on top of antiquated infrastructure.

Without updated technology and manageable caseloads, even the most dedicated staff cannot support youth effectively. Workers need modern tools that support relationship-based practice, caseloads that allow time for meaningful connection, training on relationship building, and supervision focused on coaching and development, not just compliance. Think of Us is piloting AI technology in our Virtual Support Services program to supplement the training and supervision that our community responders receive. AI can help them get even more support beyond their supervisors, and there are important applications from this work for child welfare caseworkers too.

By streamlining caseworker systems and updating technology, we can help workers respond at the speed youth need. But recognize: streamlining paperwork doesn't change the fact that caseworkers' days are bound by compliance to well-meaning but onerous rules, not by what is right for children. It can't fix the structural issue that caseworkers do not have the tools to provide young people what they actually need.

Closing

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

All of this makes one thing very clear. The system is not working for youth. Looking at Jasmine's story and the children who were kicked out of extended care, it is clear that structural reforms are needed to expand the support the system can provide and to increase the flexibility and speed of care. We must make those reforms, but we must also recognize that the system is not a replacement for family. It is, at best, a valuable substitute. A government funding program can never be as agile as a family, and it cannot wrap layers of support around a youth like a loving community. If Jasmine had the loving community she deserved, she would have a cosmetology degree today.

We know that the right technology can accelerate progress and produce better outcomes for young people and families, but it is also clear that technology must be in service to a broader vision of what youth need: to be loved and know that they will be loved forever, to be protected from trauma and given the chance to heal from the trauma they have experienced, and to be stable enough to develop in a healthy way.

Young people aging out of foster care deserve more than survival. They deserve stability, connection, identity, hope, and the sense that the adults around them believe in their future. And they should never have to depend on a caseworker's ability to navigate siloed, unaccountable, outdated systems in order to stay housed, healthy, and safe.

We have the data. We have the experience. We have the youth voices. Now we need a system that honors all three. With your leadership, we can build a modern, youth-centered, coordinated approach that finally delivers the outcomes our young people deserve.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to this work.