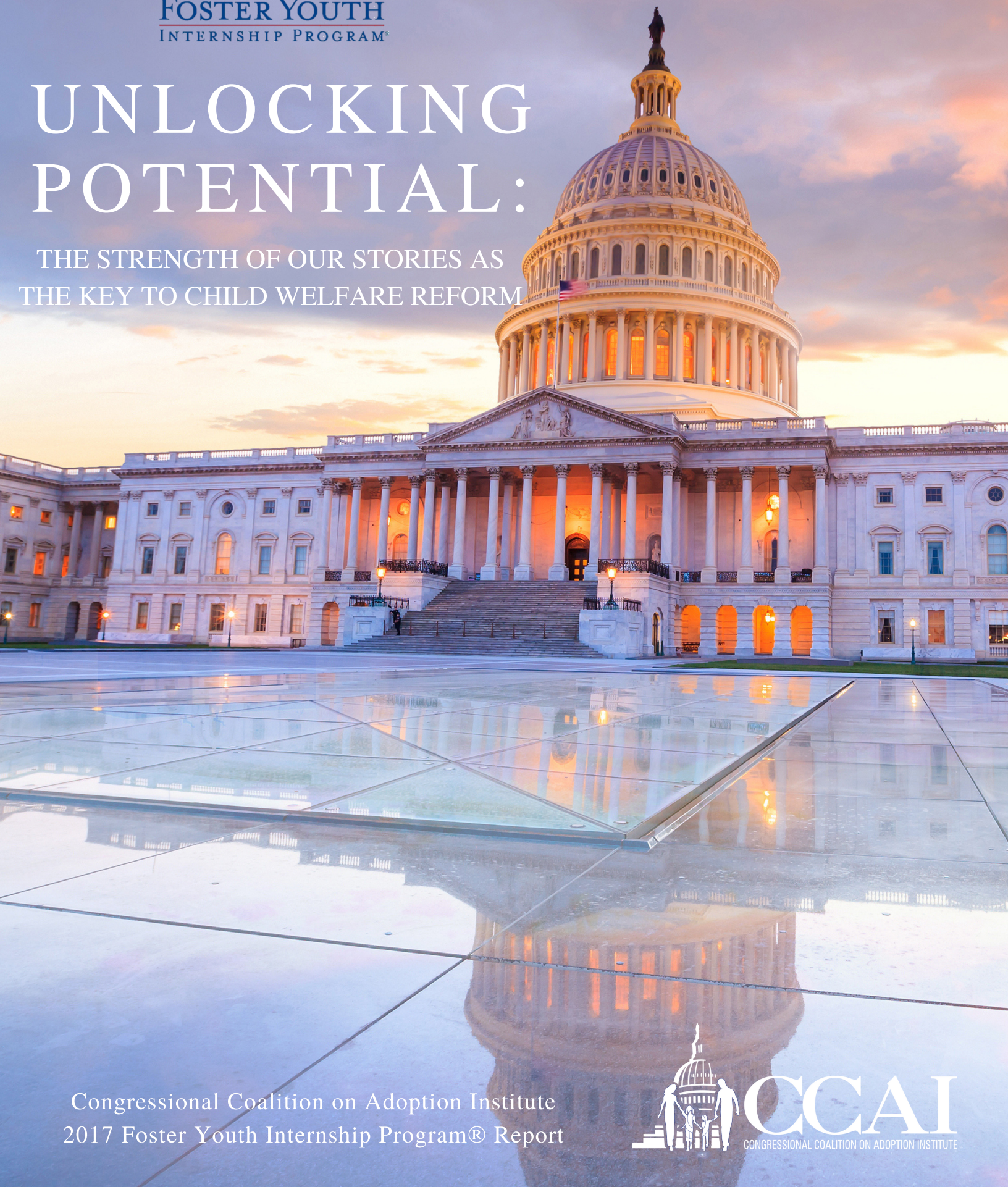




FOSTER YOUTH  
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM®

# UNLOCKING POTENTIAL:

THE STRENGTH OF OUR STORIES AS  
THE KEY TO CHILD WELFARE REFORM



Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute  
2017 Foster Youth Internship Program® Report



**CCAI**  
CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE





## History

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a nonprofit, bipartisan organization that works to raise awareness about the needs of children without families and to remove policy barriers that hinder them from knowing the love and support a family provides. CCAI is unique in that each of our programs brings together policymakers and individuals with direct foster care or adoption experience. We have found that when policymakers hear direct experiences of those affected by child welfare policy, they become engaged in this issue and work to bring about legislative improvements in an effort to ensure each child has their right to a family realized.

CCAI was founded in 2001 by advocates of the world's orphaned and foster youth. In founding CCAI, these advocates sought to match the commitment of members of Congress' Adoption Caucus, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption, with the information and resources needed to make the dream of a family a reality for every child.

## Mission Statement

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children around the world in need of permanent, safe, and loving homes and to eliminating the barriers that hinder them from realizing their basic right of a family.

## Foster Youth Internship Program®

CCAI's Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program® is a highly esteemed congressional internship for young adults who spent time in the U.S. foster care system. The FYI Program began in 2003 as an effort to raise awareness to federal policymakers about the needs and unique perspectives of those who spent time in foster care. As part of the program, CCAI organizes retreats, advocacy trainings and various networking opportunities with experts in the child welfare field. Throughout the summer, the interns spend time researching about policy issues affecting foster children and youth across the country. These experiences allow them to create a policy report that is presented at a congressional briefing and released to child welfare advocates across the country.

As a result of the FYI Program, federal policymakers are shown firsthand the experiences of youth in foster care, and use their new knowledge to inspire legislative change. Interns participating in this program benefit both personally and professionally, gaining experience and skills that will bolster their careers for years to come and developing the foundation to be lifelong advocates for improving the foster care system.

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# FOREWORD

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It is my great pleasure to introduce the twelve authors of this policy report. Justin, Alexis, Tiffany, Eden, Tonisha, Keola, Jameelah, Michael, Htet Htet, Jameshia, Demontea and Alex have worked diligently—throughout an incredibly rigorous summer congressional internship program—to research and write about federal child welfare policy and present the results of their analysis here.

Each year, CCAI's Foster Youth Interns take on this important task to ensure the nearly 428,000 children currently in foster care across the nation face less obstacles than they themselves did, and instead experience improved life outcomes. By combining their experiences in foster care with their own creative solutions to barriers in U.S. child welfare policy, these extraordinary young professionals hope to inspire federal policymakers and advocates to make positive changes in laws, policies and regulations.

The Board of Directors and staff at the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) are extremely proud of each of these authors. Each embraced the tension of reflecting on past challenges, in order to offer recommendations for champions in Congress, the Administration and the private sector to consider and incorporate when crafting improvements to current child welfare policy and practice.

Now in its 15th year, the Foster Youth Internship Program® boasts just shy of 200 alumni currently serving in leadership positions in child welfare, business, government and philanthropy across the nation. Clearly CCAI's Foster Youth Interns go on to have an impact beyond the United States Congress and their summer presence in congressional offices and on committees of jurisdiction over foster care.

This year, CCAI would like to express our gratitude to Hope Cooper and Marci Roth, of True North Group. We were very proud to partner with them in the Foster Youth Interns' report writing process this summer. Their expertise in child welfare policy and leadership in the report writing process was incredible, and this report is in its final state because of their guidance and editing. The CCAI Foster Youth Interns and staff all benefited from their participation in this unique task.

Finally, I want to sincerely thank those who invested in CCAI's mission and these inspiring young leaders. A program of the magnitude of CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program® would simply not be possible without significant investment of time, talent and treasure in each of our twelve interns. From our Board of Directors and Advisory Council, to our volunteer report advisors and selection committee, to CCAI's partners and sponsors - we are extremely grateful for the robust support the CCAI staff and Foster Youth Interns receive to make this program successful year after year, and so I invite you to take a moment to read our Acknowledgements and Partners pages at the end of this report.

It is now my honor to introduce the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's 2017 Foster Youth Internship Program® Report, *Unlocking Potential: The Strength of Our Stories as the Key to Child Welfare Reform*.

*Becky Weichhand*

Becky Weichhand  
Executive Director

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM AND REPORT



*The Foster Youth Internship Program® is a signature program  
of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute.*

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a nonprofit, bipartisan organization dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children in the U.S. and around the world in need of permanent, safe and loving homes, and to eliminating the barriers that hinder these children from realizing their basic right to a family. CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program® is a highly esteemed congressional internship for young adults who spent their formative years in the U.S. foster care system. CCAI's Foster Youth Interns are selected to participate in the program because they display both the interest and skill necessary to serve as effective advocates for change. The opinions expressed in the Foster Youth Internship Program® Report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the view of CCAI.



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# Improving Access to and Awareness of Behavioral Health Services for Transition-Age Adolescents in Out-of-Home Care

*Justin Abbasi*

## Executive Summary

Youth in out-of-home care (“youth in care”), including youth in foster care, are more likely to experience behavioral health disorders and less likely to receive sufficient and appropriate behavioral health services than other youth in the United States. The services that youth in care receive often fail to address the role of trauma in the etiology of those disorders. These issues are of heightened concern for adolescents who transition from care to independent living after reaching their state’s age of majority (“aging out”), typically at age 18. Aging out often creates stressors that affect the behavioral health of adolescents and inhibits their access to behavioral health services. Even when adolescents who have aged out or will age out from out-of-home care (“transition-age adolescents”) have putative access to behavioral health services, impediments such as a lack of transportation and awareness of their eligibility for services can further inhibit their receipt of needed care. Congress should consider enacting policy changes to: improve the availability of trauma-informed, evidence-based behavioral health services to transition-age adolescents; implement programs that help transition-age adolescents access those services; and ensure that transition-age adolescents are aware of how they can access those services.

## Personal Reflections

I know from personal experience and conversations with other adolescents who were in care that aging out can be incredibly difficult. Transitioning from care can present challenges both small and large to the 20,000 adolescents who age out each year, often without the social supports that they had in care. These challenges range from moving their belongings to a new location to building a new support network (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2016). The concurrent lack of supports that transition-age adolescents have while they face those challenges can exacerbate existing behavioral health challenges or contribute to the emergence of new ones. Our child welfare and health systems have heretofore not offered the supports necessary for the behavioral health needs of transition-age adolescents (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). The federal and state governments have an ethical obligation, by assuming responsibility for youth in care, to ensure that transition-age adolescents who need behavioral health services receive them.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

Congress can mitigate the adverse behavioral health outcomes that transition-age adolescents experience by improving access to and awareness of behavioral health services. Doing so may also mitigate long-term costs related to later incarceration, health disabilities, and enrollment in means-tested benefit programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Specifically, Members of Congress should consider enacting the following policy changes:

- Amend Section 477 of the Social Security Act to improve the availability of trauma-informed, evidence-based psychosocial services to transition-age adolescents via additional grants and technical assistance.



- Amend Section 477 of the Social Security Act to improve the accessibility of trauma-informed, evidence-based psychosocial services to transition-age adolescents via additional funding for wraparound services.
- Amend Section 475(5)(H) of the Social Security Act to ensure that transition-age adolescents are aware of how they can access those services.

## The Problem

Youth in care face a higher risk for experiencing behavioral health disorders than the general population of youth in the United States (Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009; Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013; White, Havalchak, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2007) and other youth who are enrolled in Medicaid (Medicaid and CHIP Payment and Access Commission [MACPAC], 2015). Despite that risk, youth in care are approximately half as likely as the general population of youth to have health insurance (Jaudes, 2012) and frequently lack the timely mental health screenings and sufficient mental health services that they need (Burns et al., 2004; Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009).

The behavioral health services provided to youth in care are often insufficient and can, at times, be inappropriate. Evidence-based, trauma-informed psychosocial services have been found to be most effective and appropriate for youth in care with behavioral health disorders (American Psychological Association [APA], 2006; Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014; Leslie et al., 2010). However, youth in care are prescribed psychotropic medications at rates three times higher than other youth enrolled in Medicaid (United States Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2012; Zito et al., 2008) and are more likely than not to receive psychotropic medications before they receive any psychosocial service in the three months prior to their prescription (Finnerty, Neese-Todd, Pritam, Leckman-Westin, Bilder, Byron, & Scholle, 2016). Psychotropic medications can have significant adverse side effects (APA, 2006), are considered less safe than psychosocial services (APA, 2006), and should only be used in conjunction with psychosocial services (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2015). In addition, patients prefer psychosocial services over psychotropic medications (McHugh, Whitton, Peckham, Welge, & Otto, 2013). Medications can play an important role as part of a comprehensive treatment plan, but cannot by themselves address the role of trauma in the etiology of behavioral health disorders among youth in care (AACAP, 2015).

Although many transition-age adolescents are in greater need of behavioral health services than they were in care, they are less likely to receive them. (Figure 1; Brown, Courtney, & McMillen, 2015; Sakai et al., 2014). The behavioral health needs of youth in care often persist throughout their transition into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2011; McMillen, 2005). That transition also presents increased risks to the behavioral health of transition-age adolescents, thereby compounding their need for improved access to and awareness of behavioral health services (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001).

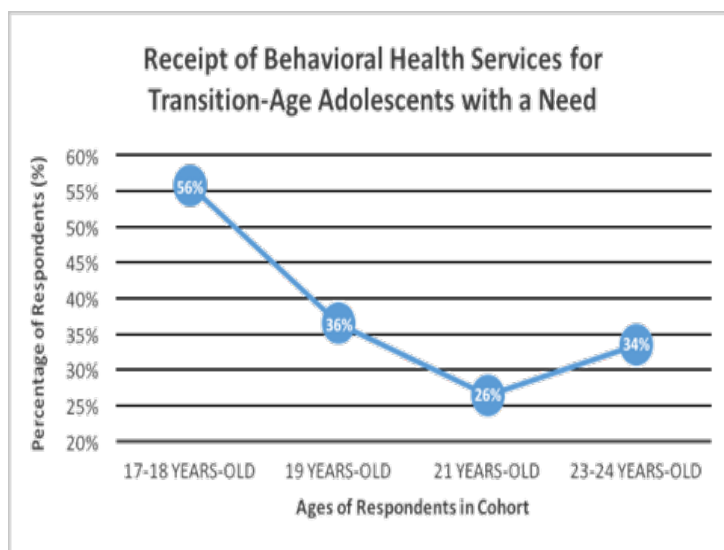


Figure 1. Percentages of adolescents transitioning from care with a behavioral health need who received behavioral health services in the year prior to survey administration. Respondents were of a single cohort followed through time (n = 501, 321, 235, 236) Data adopted from Brown et al., 2015.

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There is insufficient access to behavioral health care in the United States for all young people (Costello, He, Sampson, Kessler, & Merikangas, 2014; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). This is partially due to low reimbursement rates through Medicaid and other insurers (Jaudes, 2012; Sakai et al., 2014). There is also insufficient access for youth in care to trauma-informed behavioral health services (Szilagyi et al., 2015) and insufficient technical assistance for youth in care about how to access those services. This includes access to information about how transition-age adolescents can maintain health insurance.

Transition-age adolescents have reported several factors that likely contribute to their decreased receipt of needed behavioral health services, including (Brown, Courtney, & McMillen, 2015):

- Not being enrolled in a health insurance plan, despite the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act's (Pub.L. 111-148) provision that ensures eligibility for Medicaid until age 26 for youth who age out of care;
- Having services from their original health care provider discontinued as a result of their transition;
- Feeling unprepared to independently seek health care services;
- Lacking social supports that could help motivate them to seek behavioral health care;
- Not knowing when to access behavioral health services, due to an insufficient understanding of what constitutes a behavioral health problem; and
- Experiencing difficulty in scheduling and getting to behavioral health care appointments.

Efforts to improve access to and awareness of these services for transition-age adolescents could help address this problem.

### **Current Law**

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Pub.L. 106-169) help ensure that transition-age adolescents receive behavioral health services via expanded Medicaid eligibility and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. However, significant barriers to behavioral health care access remain despite these reforms. Congress should therefore expand its efforts to ensure that transition-age adolescents receive these needed behavioral health services by further amending the Social Security Act.

States' efforts to facilitate the receipt of behavioral health services for transition-age adolescents have proven successful and offer potential models for federal reform. In 2008, Texas became the first state to create a Medicaid managed care plan specifically for youth in care named "STAR Health." This plan includes the "Adolescent 2 Adult" program, which helps encourage positive health-seeking behaviors in transition-age adolescents via financial incentives. Texas' STAR Health program has resulted in timely health screenings, trauma-informed training for care providers, and reductions in prescription rates of psychotropic medications (The Texas Association of Health Plans [TAHP], 2016). Indiana and Nebraska have also created programs that help transition-age adolescents access behavioral health services (Indiana Connected by 25, n.d.; Project Everlast, n.d.). These efforts demonstrate that such projects can improve the accessibility to and awareness of behavioral health services for transition-age adolescents, and that states are willing to adopt such projects. Federal reforms to current law based on these successful examples could better meet the behavioral health needs of transition-age adolescents.



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## Policy Recommendations

- **Amend Section 477 of the Social Security Act to improve the availability of trauma-informed, evidence-based psychosocial services to transition-age adolescents via additional grants and technical assistance.**

Congress should provide funding for grants and technical assistance to build state psychosocial services capacity to ensure that transition-age adolescents have access to mental health screenings and comprehensive, trauma-informed, evidence-based psychosocial services, particularly in areas that currently lack such services and are populated with individuals who have a demonstrated behavioral health need and insufficient behavioral health care access, including vulnerable populations such as transition-age adolescents.

- **Amend Section 477 of the Social Security Act to improve the accessibility of trauma-informed, evidence-based psychosocial services to transition-age adolescents via additional funding for wraparound services.**

Congress should provide funding for wraparound services to facilitate access to and receipt of behavioral health services for transition-age adolescents, including transportation costs, transportation services, and reimbursement for lost wages.

- **Amend Section 475(5)(H) of the Social Security Act to ensure that transition-age adolescents are aware of how they can access those services.**

Congress should create provisions to ensure that transition plans for transition-age adolescents include information about the terms of their health insurance coverage, including coverage for behavioral health services; information about how to renew their coverage; and a listing of available health care providers in their area who will accept their coverage prior to their discharge from care.

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# Ensuring Normalcy for Foster Youth by Establishing Youth-Friendly Children's Ombudsman Offices

*Keola Limkin*

## Executive Summary

To further promote normalcy for youth experiencing the foster care system, United States policymakers have made advances to ensure youth have rights and that they are aware of them. For example, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 established the right for foster youth to participate in their case planning, obtain important documents, and join extracurricular activities. Unfortunately, even to this day, youth rights are violated, and many youth do not know how to advocate for themselves. Establishing a youth grievance complaint process in all 50 states will create accountability and strengthen opportunities for youth self-advocacy when their rights are violated.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

Members of Congress can build on this policy by making amendments to the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, Public Law 113-183. My three policy recommendations are:

- **Require states to establish a youth-friendly Children's Ombudsman Office (COO)/ Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) in every US State.**
- **Ensure that COO/OCA are established independently with oversight of child welfare services.**
- **Ensure that COO/OCA have online complaint filing forms that are youth-friendly.**

## Personal Reflection

During my experience in foster care, I was fortunate to have many of my wants and needs met by my foster parent, social worker and guardian ad litem (GAL). However, through living with other foster siblings and advocating for foster youth as an adult, I have seen the everyday life struggles of youth who were not as fortunate. As a foster youth leadership board member for five years, I have witnessed a lot of youth tell their story and realized they could have benefitted from another tool to voice their needs. In addition, while interviewing teenage youth in care at three events and hearing testimony over the past two years, I found that many youth were unaware of their rights or had rights violated. In a foster youth bills of rights workshop that my colleagues and I helped to facilitate in 2016, we taught youth ages 14-17 about their rights and conducted an informal survey. Of these youth, 26 percent (13 of 50 respondents) reported their right to have visitation or contact with family members had been violated at some point during their time in foster care (Ulima, 2016).

## The Problem

Public Law 113-183 spells out provisions provided to youth such as the right to participate in their case planning, obtain important documents, and join extracurricular activities. However, PL 113-183 does not ensure accountability to foster youth to make sure that their rights are honored. Despite the advances that have been made, youth's rights are still being violated, and few know where to go to file a complaint and get the help they need.



The lack of a consistent, youth friendly complaint process in many states is concerning for three main reasons. First, youth do not always have a trusting or healthy relationship with either their resource caregiver(s), social worker, GAL, court appointed special advocate (CASA), service provider, etc. In Colorado, a Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) that opened a review with a youth learned about reports that the caseworker missed meetings. A report stated the CPO was concerned and expressed that the relationship was “negatively affecting the permanency of the juvenile.” (Villafuerte, 2016) Second, there are barriers for youth in reaching their agency supervisor, county director, or family court judge (e.g. transportation, stationary supplies, level of education) for assistance. In a meeting I attended, a professional asked a family court judge if the youth would be able to call him from a telephone. The judge told her that he would be able to accept letters by mail. However, it may be difficult for youth to know how to prepare and send formal letters.

Finally, there is wide variation of function in youth grievance processes between local, county, or state entities. For instance, Maine’s Children’s Ombudsman’s website only allows a person to file a complaint through email or phone call. Just over half, or 27 states, have an COO/OCA with a complaint process at the state level (“National Conference,” n.d.). Only nine offices have online submission complaint applications available. In addition, only three online complaint forms looked youth-friendly to me (e.g. easy to complete). These youth-friendly states consisted of Colorado, Massachusetts, and Utah (“National Conference,” n.d.).

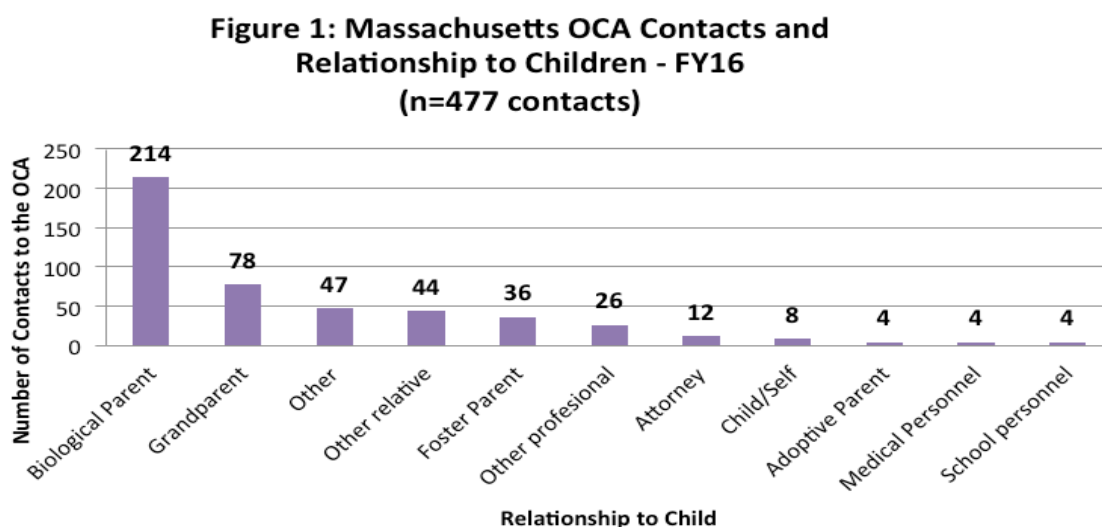
### The Current Complaint Process and Its Usage

Given the wide variation in how complaints can be made and how youth friendly they are, perhaps it is not surprising that youth complaints comprise a small fraction of the overall complaints made each year. The Massachusetts’ Office of the Child Advocate’s Fiscal Year 2016 report shows that eight youth filed complaints on behalf of themselves to the OCA (Mossaides, 2017).

These filings contribute to the total of 477, primarily from other people such as family members and professionals (Mossaides, 2017). Figure 1 shows that the leading groups that filed complaints were biological parents followed by grandparents. Youth should comprise a larger portion of the whole.

### Current Law

According to Pokempner, many states have grievance policies under the Social Security Act (2015). PL 113-183 amended Title IV-E so that foster youth are entitled to the same due process protections if



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they are not assured the normalcy “benefits” (Pokempner, 2015). US code, 42 U.S.C. 671 (a) (12) “provides for granting an opportunity for a fair hearing before the State agency to any individual whose claim for benefits available pursuant to this part is denied or is not acted upon with reasonable promptness.”

In the works of Pokempner, establishing a youth-friendly grievance process is among the six different core components of an effective normalcy law (2015). PL 113-183, Sec. 475a requires intensive, ongoing documentation in order for children to be designated as APPLA (another planned permanency living arrangement). It is not a “normal” experience for a child to age out of the foster care system without a family. Pokempner recommends that “states that have a foster care Ombudsman should include normalcy in the list of youth rights” (2015). A grievance process would ensure these rights are respected.

Karen de Sa, Mercury News reported that in a recent year the California Foster Care Ombudsperson received 202 youth complaints, “everything from placement changes to a lack of sibling visits” (2016). Foster youth need an ombudsman office in order to ensure their normalcy, build resiliency, and eventually succeed in life.

### **Independent with Oversight Specific to Child Welfare**

Independent offices that provide oversight to child welfare agencies should be the gold standard. Offices that are characterized by this feature reflect the best practices for ombudsman offices/ programs defined by the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA). The USOA’s four best practices consist of 1) independent, 2) impartial, 3) confidentiality, and 4) credible review process (“National Conference,” n.d.). Only 11 offices so far fit into this particular independent category.

Some state governments took up the challenge to manage a robust and responsive system. The Massachusetts Office of the Child Advocate for example is an independent office that has some great features; they have a 48-hour response time for youth grievance processes (“Massachusetts Office,” n.d.). This feature is optimal when thinking about a youth’s sense of time versus an adult’s sense of time. The online application appears easy to use and reflects the ideals of Pokempner, “grievance policies must be youth-friendly and easy to understand and use” (2015).

### **Role of Ombudsman Offices**

A barrier that exists is the belief that youth already have enough agents to help them resolve their issues. State ombudsman services are advised to be used fourth in the hierarchy of the child welfare system. The order advised begins with the social worker/caseworker, then agency supervisor, then county director (may have different title), and finally reaching the state ombudsman (“Child Welfare,” 2016). Even though youth have multiple agents to help assist them, youth should have a greater variety of resources available to them at all times to ensure their rights are being met.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Congress should improve upon the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, Public Law 113-183. Here are my three recommendations.

- **Require states to establish a youth-friendly Children’s Ombudsman Office (COO)/ Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) in every US State.**

These offices should be as easy to access by youth as possible. Staff members should be further trained in authentic-engagement and trauma-informed matters. They should also consider operating outreach to youth as a portion of their duties.

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- **Ensure that COO/OCA are established independently with oversight of child welfare services.**

These offices established by the legislature act independently in the legislative or executive branch. They oversee child welfare agencies. These offices exhibit independence, impartiality, confidentiality, and have a credible review process which includes access to information.

- **Ensure that COO/OCA have online complaint filing forms that are youth-friendly**

The online forms should be easy to use and tailor to more developmentally-able young people. For instance, an 11-year-old boy or a 14-year-old girl could access it with relative ease. Other access mediums such as email, phone, and mail should also be available.

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# Reforming the Criminal Justice System's Response to Delinquency: Ensuring Equity of Access to Diversion Programs for Crossover Youth

*Michael Teresa Mellifera*

## Executive Summary

Since the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (JJDPA) was originally established, Congress has invested a tremendous amount of time, resources, and taxpayer dollars in order to advance the best policies and practices in the juvenile justice system. Reforms have made quantifiable improvements to the way many juvenile offenders are perceived, housed, and treated. However, these reforms are not improving outcomes for all justice-involved youth, specifically those who have experienced maltreatment. Compared to the general youth population, maltreated youth are twice as likely to engage in delinquent behavior and come to the attention of law enforcement authorities, becoming what is known as “crossover youth” (Bilanin, Bowley, Ho, & Young, 2014). Crossover youth tend to penetrate the juvenile justice system more deeply, resulting in longer and more frequent stays in formal incarceration settings (National Research Council, 2013). Numerous studies demonstrate that deeper penetration in the juvenile justice system impedes healthy adolescent development and increases the rate of recidivism after release. Congress must strengthen, reauthorize, and fully fund the JJDPA while adding new provisions which will first, incentivize states to improve their understanding of crossover youth issues, and second, hold accountable all federal, state, and local authorities for reducing the disproportionate number of crossover youth formally involved in the justice system.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

- Congress should add another core compliance requirement to the JJDPA called “Disproportionate Crossover Youth Contact,” or DCYC, which shall become a condition for receipt of the Title II Formula Grants Program.
- Congress should require the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to create a joint-commission tasked with developing uniform federal standards for graduated sanctions systems and diversion program eligibility, with particular focus on crossover youth issues.

## Personal Reflection

My father was an abusive man who spent the majority of my adolescence in prison for procuring women and selling drugs. My mother was a former prostitute who suffered from manic depression, suicidality, and severe addiction to prescription drugs and alcohol. When my brother was nine and I was seven, an Ohio court first charged my mother with child endangerment and other drug-related offenses. Though the child welfare agency took custody of my brother and I at an early age, we never found permanency or normalcy while in care. In fact, my brother and I changed placements throughout our childhood including three separate reunification attempts with our mother and ten other caregivers who were unequipped to help us recover from our past trauma. Additionally, the child welfare system stripped many normal adolescent opportunities away from us, including a family-based placement and educational stability. My brother and I became one another’s home while in care, providing each other a sense of safety, continuity, and emotional support; however, that did not treat or cure my brother’s trauma and its lasting effects.

When I was fourteen, my brother and I were separated and permanently estranged from one another by court order. This was due to his behavioral issues in our placements and his increasing interactions with law enforcement for petty crimes. Because my brother cared deeply and wanted to provide for me, he resorted to delinquency, an immoral but common decision for foster youth (Currie & Tekin 2012). While



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certainly culpable for his delinquent behaviors, my brother should not have been considered a serious, violent, or chronic juvenile offender. However, rather than disaggregating juvenile offenders into those who present a risk to public safety and those who do not, the juvenile justice system viewed delinquency monolithically and my brother was incarcerated in a secure confinement facility on multiple occasions. Though incarceration was intended to end his criminal career before it started, it only exacerbated his pre-existing trauma by confining him to institutional settings, which restricted his access to adequate education, mental health services, and community support. Incarceration led my brother to become more deeply entrenched in criminal activity after his release.



My brother went on to accumulate a number of criminal charges after his release. Following his emancipation, my brother was convicted and imprisoned within only one year, an experience he shares with approximately one in four alumni of foster care who also become justice-involved within two years of aging out. (A Sense of Home, Breaking the Cycle) What began as misdemeanors as a juvenile quickly became felonies as an adult. When my brother was incarcerated the first time as a juvenile, the trajectory of his life changed forever when he was branded in his youth as a villain in need of harsh punishment rather than rehabilitation. Even now, I have a hard time reconciling the memories of my brother, the boy, with the knowledge I have about my brother, the man.

### **The Problem**

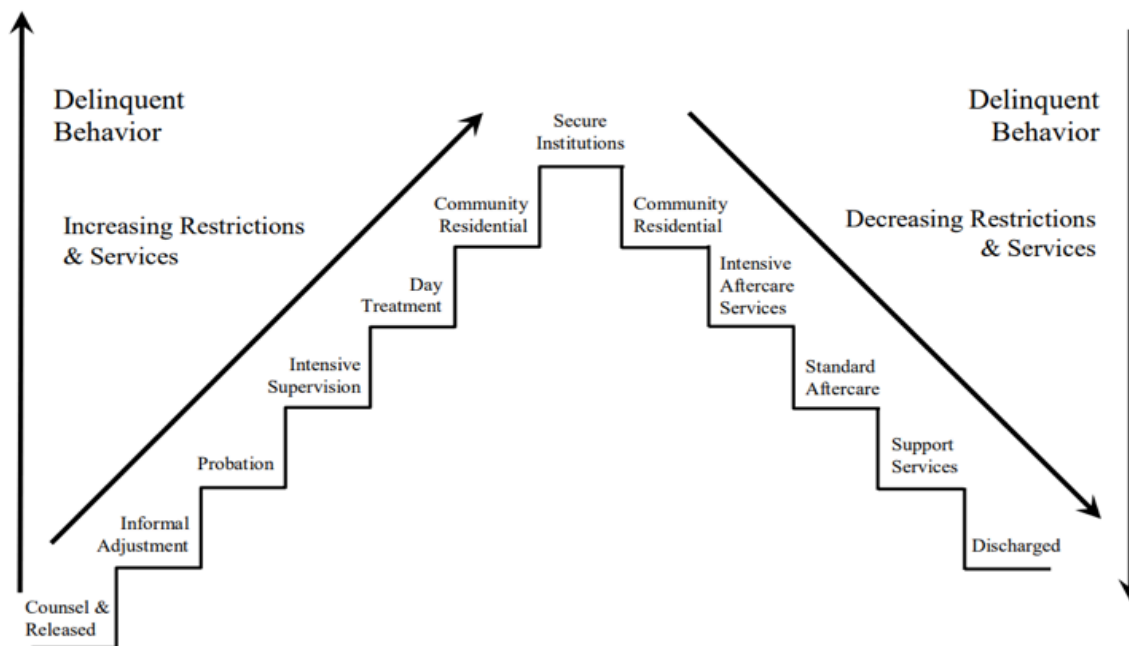
My older brother's descent into a life of criminality was not a statistical anomaly. Compared to the general youth population, research shows that crossover youth have a higher number of juvenile delinquency filings; a higher number of lengthy detention stays; a higher chance of being placed in secure confinement; a higher rate of recidivating; and a higher rate of admission into the adult justice system (Bilanin et al., 2014; National Center for Juvenile Justice 2014; Bilchik, 2010). These findings beg the question of why foster youth are originally making contact with and subsequently becoming more deeply and chronically involved with the justice system. To begin answering why this is, it is critical to understand the "story behind the trend" (Herz et al., 2012).

Foster youth have disproportionately experienced adverse childhood experiences including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunctions such as mental illness, domestic violence, and the incarceration of a parent (Center for Youth Wellness, 2015). Prior to entry into the child welfare system, 86 percent of youth have experienced child neglect, 47 percent physical abuse, and 37 percent sexual abuse. Foster youth are at greater risk for negative outcomes including mental health disorders, polysubstance abuse, school failure, social disconnect, homelessness, and teenage pregnancy. Recent studies also suggest that state intervention into the lives of foster children also contributes to their trauma through a lack of stability, permanency, or normalcy while in care. Unfortunately, 33 percent of foster youth report maltreatment by their substitute caregivers (Havlicek & Courtney, 2016). Foster youth are more likely to experience severe types of maltreatment on multiple occasions which proportionately increases their likelihood to become involved in the juvenile justice system (Bilanin et al., 2014).

Though children who experience maltreatment early in life are not predestined to become criminals, research has shown that maltreatment is a major predictor of future criminal behavior. Different psychological

theories posit why this is. For instance, the Social-Psychological Strain Theory maintains that maltreatment causes acute stress during critical developmental periods which may have a permanent adverse effect on a child's brain functioning and thus, behavior (Currie & Tekin, 2012). Research has also indicated that the adolescent brain does not fully develop until their early 20s, meaning that they are predisposed to impulsive, aggressive, and self-destructive behavior (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). The U.S. Supreme Court has elevated these scientific studies of adolescent brain development in landmark cases such as *Roper v. Simmons* (2005) and *Miller v. Alabama* (2012).

## EXAMPLE OF GRADUATED SANCTIONS



*SOURCE: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Graduated Sanctions for Juvenile Offenders (2005)*

When foster youth are arrested for delinquent acts, they are more likely than other youth to be detained, adjudicated, and incarcerated despite their offenses being no more serious (Bilanin et al., 2014). The juvenile justice system is often biased in its decisions due to the perception that crossover youth are higher risk or because they do not have a biological parent advocating for them. Examples of secure confinement include training schools, youth prisons, and some prison-like residential treatment facilities. Incarceration isolates crossover youth from healthy adolescent activities including education, prosocial interaction with adult and peer role models, and community engagement. Additionally, crossover youth are more likely to have complex service needs such as mental health disorders, substance abuse issues, and learning disabilities. These needs often go unmet while they are incarcerated because many juvenile justice facilities are not adequately equipped to deal with them. While these services are available, the child welfare and juvenile justice systems lack the coordination to provide specialized, multi-systemic therapies to youth in custody. Crossover youth are at risk for re-traumatization in secure confinement because they are placed in environments marked by long periods of isolation in sterile surroundings under the near constant threat of punishment (McCarthy, Schiraldi & Shark, 2016). Unfortunately, there have been fourteen states with clearly documented violent or abusive conditions in their incarceration facilities after 2011, including sexual misconduct by staff (Mendel, 2015).

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## Current Law

The Children's Bureau in HHS and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in DOJ are the federal agencies which have jurisdiction over crossover youth. Historically, the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have suffered from lack of information-sharing and lack of coordination in developing multi-systems therapies for the youth they both serve. Members of Congress are now aware that the systems must coordinate and collaborate and have introduced legislation such as the The CONNECT Act (S. 1067) in the 115th Congress to facilitate that systems-integration.

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act principally entitles eligible entities to federal reimbursement for some of the costs for providing foster care, adoption assistance, or kinship guardianship assistance (Stoltzfus, 2017). The JJDP of the 21st Century DOJ Appropriations Authorization Act principally creates federal institutions, establishes grant programs, and promulgates requirements that states must adhere to in order to be eligible to receive federal funding for state and federal juvenile justice efforts (Finklea, 2012). The four compliance requirements currently expressed in the JJDP are [1] the deinstitutionalization of status offenders, [2] the separation of juveniles from adults in secure facilities, [3] the removal of juveniles from adult jails and lockups, and [4] the reduction of disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system.

The Supporting Youth Opportunity and Preventing Delinquency Act (H.R. 5963) reauthorizes the JJDP and passed the House in the 114th Congress but was not enacted. The JJDP Reauthorization Act of 2015 (S. 1169) was introduced to the Senate in the 114th Congress but has not yet passed. S. 1169 includes new reforms to improve juvenile justice practices and policies but does not explicitly identify crossover youth as a target population. Without explicitly identifying crossover youth as the target of reform, these reforms are unlikely to significantly affect crossover youth who have not been proportionately helped by previous reform.

Currently, state statutes governing diversion programs codify eligibility criteria, program mission, duration, conditions, and services among other things. Examples of diversion programs include community service, victim-offender mediation, community accountability boards, and family group conferences. As the 2011 Juvenile Diversion Guidebook observes, state statutes vary widely from one another. For example, North Carolina provides an explicit list of non-divertible offenses (N.C.G.S.A. § 7B-1706). Arizona more broadly requires that the divertible youth cannot have committed a "dangerous" crime (A.R.S. § 8-321). The District of Columbia limits diversion to only first-time offenders (DC ST § 16-2305.01). Montana bases diversion eligibility on the legal history and severity of the alleged offense(s) (MCA § 41- 5-1302). Even within states, there are county by county differences based on county resources and funding. Though states do need flexibility to meet their specific population needs, there needs to be a basic federal standard to ensure equity of access to diversion for crossover youth across the nation. Unfortunately, crossover youth currently constitute only 1 percent of all diverted cases but 42 percent of all cases placed in private group homes or residential treatment facilities (NRC, 2013).

Some states have recognized that the response of the juvenile justice system has been too punitive and have begun taking strides to improve justice-involved youth outcomes. For instance, in 2005, Indiana started implementing the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) in 31 counties which encompasses approximately 70 percent of Indiana's juvenile population. JDAI is an Anne E. Casey Foundation pilot program which reduces juvenile detention populations by diverting them to less expensive and more effective community-based alternatives. A hallmark of Indiana's reforms is the Indiana Youth Assessment System (IYAS,) which is now administered at varying contact points in the juvenile justice system. This assessment helps courts determine the risk a youth's behavior presents, identify mental health concerns to address in treatment, and set the sanction level. In 2015, Indiana went on to pass Enrolled Act 1196, or Public Law 66. This law explicitly identifies crossover youth and creates a series of assessments and interactions to better address their needs as they are moved through the system. All together these reforms have reduced admissions to secure detention by 53 percent between 2005 and 2016 (Testimony of Devon McDonald, 2017).

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## Policy Recommendations

- Congress should add another core compliance requirement to the JJDPA called “Disproportionate Crossover Youth Contact,” or DCYC, which shall become a condition for receipt of the Title II Formula Grants Program.

To be in compliance, a state must: 1. Identify the extent to which DCYC exists, 2. Assess and comprehensively analyze to determine the significant factors contributing to DCYC at each contact point, 3. Implement intervention strategies to reduce DCYC, 4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the delinquency prevention and system-improvement strategies, 5. Monitor to track changes to DCYC statewide and in local jurisdictions to determine whether there has been progress towards DCYC reduction. OJJDP shall conduct an Annual Compliance Determination Assessment based on the reporting data states submit. States found to be noncompliant with the DCYC requirement shall incur a formula grant funding reduction of 15 percent in the subsequent fiscal year.

- Congress should require DOJ and HHS to create a joint-commission tasked with developing uniform federal standards for graduated sanctions systems and diversion program eligibility, with particular focus on crossover youth issues.

Six to twelve months after enactment, the joint-commission shall be appointed. The joint commission shall include state and local representation from, if appropriate, the police and sheriff’s department, prosecutor’s office, juvenile court, probation office, educational agency, social service agency, nonprofit victim advocacy organization, nonprofit, religious, or community group, research fields such as criminology, child psychology, public health, and economics, and former crossover youth. The mission of the joint-commission is to: 1. conduct a review of existing research literature, state policies, and promising best practices in the juvenile risk assessment and screening process, 2. develop federal standards for graduated sanctions systems, 3. develop federal standards for diversion program eligibility, 4. submit two years after enactment a report to Congress and the Executive Branch detailing the joint-commission’s findings and recommendations.



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# Saving Children's Lives by Implementing an Interstate Data Sharing System and Minimum Screening Standards

*Tonisha Hora*

## Executive Summary

Too many children across the country are being overlooked and kept in dangerous homes. These children are experiencing abuse and neglect on a daily basis, from which some may die. There is an estimated one in four children who experience abuse in their lifetime (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDCP], 2016). There is no escape for them when the system overlooks them and does not address signs of abuse. This may happen because of a lack of knowledge of prior abuse or because multiple calls of abuse and neglect are ignored. These children may experience detrimental effects physically, psychologically and behaviorally. The United States suffers significant ramifications from the abuse, both economically and socially (CDCP, 2016). The financial burden on the country was estimated to be \$210,012 per child abused, per year in 2010, while the lifetime cost of a child fatality is \$1,272,900 (CDCP, 2016). This policy report proposes federal policies that will improve state child abuse and neglect registries and keep children safer by implementing an interstate data sharing network to enable states to better track reports of abuse and maintain the history of abuse.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

- For the safety of children, Congress should implement certain minimum and uniform standards regarding state policies that govern central registries of child abuse and neglect reports and the expunction of those reports. A new federal minimum standard should specify that any two or more reports for a specific child must be screened-in and an investigation required. In addition, record of reports should be maintained for no fewer than 25 years or even indefinitely.
- Congress should require states to participate in an interstate data sharing network of information in states' central registries of child abuse and neglect reports and require that all reports made (screened-in and screened-out) be retained.
- Congress should require HHS to convene an expert panel to guide the technical and legal aspects of implementing these recommendations. The panel should advise on policies to ensure privacy rights of children and adults.

## Personal Reflection

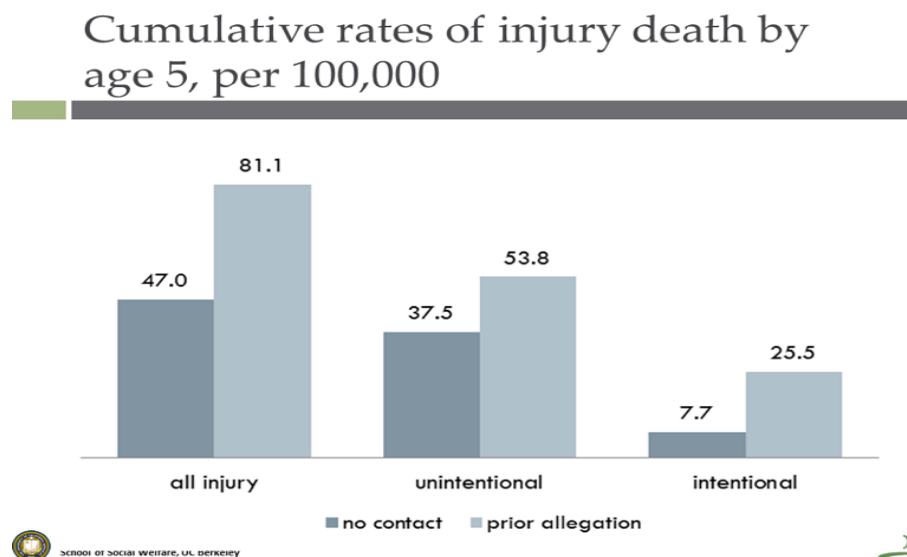
At 14 years old, my twin sister and I were removed from a kinship care placement and put in foster care after experiencing severe physical and verbal abuse for ten years. We were neglected children struggling to survive day to day in an abusive home. Child Protective Services often visited our home, sometimes multiple times a year, after they received reports from neighbors and teachers who we often asked for food to keep from being hungry or saw our bruises. We were scared children who wanted to run away every day in hopes of escaping. We were aware of how the system continued



to fail us by never removing us from our home when they should have. To us, the signs were obvious, yet CPS workers always left us there. The abuse worsened after every CPS visit. That was the problem: they always left without us. Every time. For ten years. Stronger policies may have kept us safer by highlighting the pattern of reports, which should have led to more thorough investigations of our safety. Better policies could have prevented us from having to endure abuse. For some children, it is the difference between life and death. There may have been more successful investigations if there were stronger federal policies relating to state child abuse and neglect registries. Such policies would have alerted authorities that they had received multiple reports of our situation over the years. We might not have been overlooked. Children in homes like the one I grew up in need to be given hope in a situation that feels hopeless day to day. When child abuse is suspected, phone calls need to be better documented so that they can be investigated thoroughly.

## The Problem

Many of us hear the phrase “children falling through the cracks” and yet we do not push for solutions to assist children who are in danger. Children across our nation are dying at a rate of four to seven children per day because of abuse and neglect (ChildHelp, 2017). According to H.R. 6655-112th, congressional findings show that abuse and neglect are under-reported and that almost 82 percent of the children who die from child abuse are under the age of four (Civic Impulse, 2017a). A National Strategy to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities confirms that “a call to a child protective hotline is the best predictor of a child’s potential risk of injury or death before age 5” (2016, p. 2). Concerning injury reports, this is true across all age groups. There is wide variety throughout state systems as to how they maintain their hotline reports. Some states may keep all of their reports and others only keep reports that were substantiated (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2014, p. 1). It is possible many reports of child abuse are not kept at all or kept for different lengths of time (CWIG, 2014, p. 2), and because of this, a child may be overlooked. If a previous report was no longer available, a child’s case may be screened out.



When reports of abuse and neglect come in, they are either screened-in or screened-out. When reports are screened out, those records are typically deleted. This is good for the person(s) accused of the alleged abuse, but not for the child who is being abused. Those records may be the only piece of evidence that allows authorities to put together the pieces and start an investigation. Likewise, there may be siblings still in a home, even after a child for whom the original report was filed, has reached 18 years of age. Knowing the background and history of reports for that child can expedite help for siblings who may be in an abusive situation as well.

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Western society has become much more individualized, leaving a lot of room for potentially abusive or troublesome households to be missed by the outside world. Abused children are often overlooked because they are not noticed or heard. If we create an interstate data sharing network, more children would get screened in and be taken care of. By making more uniform policies for states' central registries of abuse and neglect, and by creating an interstate data sharing network of these registries, there would be better communication among states as well as a wealth of important knowledge by keeping those records.

### **Current Law**

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) provides minimal guidance and funding to states with regard to how states respond to reports of child abuse. CAPTA provides a broad framework for states and identifies the four major types of maltreatment: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2003).

To receive federal CAPTA grants, each state must establish their own definitions of abuse and neglect. In addition, each state must develop policies for how the state responds to reports of suspected cases of abuse and neglect, including processes for screening cases in and screening cases out. State policies vary greatly with regard to the length of time they maintain records of screened in and screened out cases (CWIG, 2014, p. 1-2). For example, Washington State, according to Rev. Code §26.44.031, has to destroy screened-out reports within three years of receiving the reports, and within six years for unfounded reports (CWIG, 2014, p. 35). In South Carolina, if a report is unfounded, it has to be purged immediately from all records; identifying characteristics must be removed from records within seven years (CWIG, 2014, p. 30).

Every year, in a report titled, "Child Maltreatment," the federal government publishes data on child abuse and neglect in the U.S. The report presents data and trends based on information gathered through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2015). Although NCANDS provides highly valuable information, a number of expert panels have identified significant shortcomings in the data collected through NCANDS, including the lack of consistent data from states. In recent years, federal agencies have made significant progress in improving the utility of data through federal efforts to facilitate data sharing. For example, the National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise (NEICE), is a cloud-based electronic system for exchanging data and documents needed to place children across state lines as outlined by the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC)" (Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (AAICPC), 2015). The NEICE project has a goal of expanding across all 50 states, but currently only 17 states participate (AAICPC, 2017). It saves state money from administrative costs and it helps shorten the amount of time that it takes to place children across state lines (AAICPC, 2015).

### **Policy Recommendations**

- **For the safety of children, Congress should implement certain minimum and uniform standards regarding state policies that govern central registries of child abuse and neglect reports and the expunction of those reports.**

A new federal minimum standard should specify that any two or more reports for a specific child must be screened-in and an investigation required. In addition, record of reports should be maintained for no fewer than 25 years or even indefinitely.

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- Congress should require states to participate in an interstate data network, sharing information in central state registries of child abuse and neglect reports.
  - Congress should require HHS to convene an expert panel to guide the technical and legal aspects of implementing these recommendations. The panel should advise on policies to ensure privacy rights of children and adults.

Reports should be compiled in a state database at least until the youngest child in a family has reached adult status. Both screened out and screened in reports should be maintained, with provisions made to protect people in the unsubstantiated reports for job purposes. A national database, such as the National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise, could allow states to look up whether a child has been the subject of a report in other states.

The screened-out reports should be kept in a database, just as screened-in reports are collected based upon individual state requirements. Although perhaps not as common, sometimes a family with prior reports, either to escape the investigation or just for a general move, relocates to another state. In these cases, it would be much more efficient for authorities to refer to a system of connected state databases of reports through a simple matching query, than searching for information that is hard to find or non-existent, and miss a prior report.

There may be concerns from the reported abusers on the registries, who may be identified through background checks, that the registries are a deprivation of constitutional rights, a charge without due process of law (CWIG, 2014, p. 2). Employers are able to run their prospective workers through the registries, especially if they are working with children, and many people object to this (CWIG, 2014, pg. 2). In the case of an unsubstantiated report, it would be best to remove the accused person's names from being pulled up when employers do background searches. However, this privacy issue could be further considered by expert panels to assure privacy is maintained. For example, the system could "mask" the identity of the subjects of unsubstantiated reports (perhaps assigning them numbers and keeping their identities and numbers in a separate data table). They should not have to suffer if they are innocent, however, their names would be put into the system if they were found guilty or under watch if another call came along.

The research shows that abuse and neglect calls are a leading predictor of a child's risk of injury or death. When the state's databases show that a call has been placed on a specific child or family more than one time, there must be a mandatory screening in. With that screening in, there must be a careful investigation process that goes past asking if the caregivers or potential perpetrator are okay and believing what they say. The family should be offered services if it is determined that they are needed. If there are no obvious signs of abuse or neglect, and the child is too young to speak for themselves, then there should be a follow up process where the case is not closed immediately, depending on the severity of the case. If an investigation has been done and a case is closed, but another report comes in, the family should then be mandated to go to counseling until the underlying causes of the problem are worked out or the child is removed from the home.

## Conclusion

Although states may be doing the best they can on screening calls, the fact is that more children would be saved if the screened-out calls were preserved longer and accessible to all states. More research addressing this topic would promote understanding of how prior reports help lead to safer children across the country and how we can catch abuse earlier. Although it may be a time-consuming effort to implement a national system connecting state report databases, there is no better time spent than helping abused children survive. It is unacceptable to let even one more child fall through the cracks because we neglected to create a system where we can readily have information available that will help save lives.



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# Anomalies No More: Modifying Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) to Enhance Postsecondary Educational Attainment for Foster Youth

*Demontea Thompson*

## Executive Summary

There is a significant body of research that concludes a college education can increase a young adult's chance of advancing up the socio-economic ladder and lowering their chances of relying on public assistance (College Board, 2016). Furthermore, obtaining a college education is associated with being more active and involved citizens as well as more well-rounded parents (College Board, 2016). Based on my life experiences as a foster youth, higher education was the primary avenue that enabled me to be self-sufficient. Investing in all of the youth's college education, whether they came from the child welfare system or not, is an investment in the future of our society.

Over the last two decades, the percentage of foster youth who obtain a bachelor's degree has been stable at 3 percent (Sarubbi, et al., 2016). The lack of representation of foster youth in higher education is due to the significant financial costs of a college education (Wolanin, 2005), as well as other types of support, such as parental and emotional supports. Based on recent reports, the average cost of tuition and fees and room and board at an in-state four-year college is \$20,090 (College Board, 2016). Graduates in 2015 had an average \$30,100 in student loan debt (The Institute for College Access and Success, 2015). College students use financial support from scholarships, federal grants and loans, and other programs to pay for college. Federal child welfare policy offers support for foster youth in higher education through the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program. Targeted improvements to this important program can better address barriers and improve post-secondary educational outcomes for current and former foster youth.

Therefore, I urge Congress to adopt the following policy recommendations:

- Congress should make postsecondary education more accessible to current and former foster youth by increasing the ETV from \$5,000 to \$10,000 in the ETV to account for the rise in tuition, living expenses, and rent.
- Congress should amend the ETV to include the provision to allow foster youth to pay for college related expenses before they enroll.

## Personal Reflection

"Promise me you'll make sure my twins get through school" were the last words my legal guardian [paternal great-aunt] expressed before she passed away. My twin brother and I both adopted this prophecy. To shield ourselves from gangs and violence, the classroom became our refuge. Attending California State University, Northridge was an exciting breakthrough for me, but I was not prepared for what came with the opportunity because of the lack of guidance and



low expectations from closest adults.

The cost of college and other unforeseen challenges made it difficult for me to navigate and do well academically. In addition to attending classes and studying for exams, throughout my college years I worked a total of 30-40 hours a week to pay for basic expenses such as professional clothes and wisdom teeth surgery. Paying for food was another constant struggle. In contrast to the “freshman 15” my peers acquired, I lost 20 pounds during my first year in college. I used EBT for a couple of years to mitigate this concern. I regularly had to choose between dinner and school supplies; no student should have to choose between their health and their studies.

My twenty-first birthday made me ineligible to continue to obtain financial aid from ETV funds. I moved off campus in hopes that a smaller apartment split with my twin brother could lighten my financial burden. However, this choice ultimately had an adverse effect as the cost of housing was not included in my financial aid package, leaving me with even less financial support. I used federal loans to finish college and now I have graduated with a Masters of Education from the University of Southern California to ensure students who are struggling in college have the support and services they need to graduate. My brother eventually graduated with a degree in finance, and is working to become a financial advisor.

I am not an anomaly and I believe it is time that more foster youth are afforded opportunities to attain a higher education degree to compete in the job-market and become more engaged citizens.

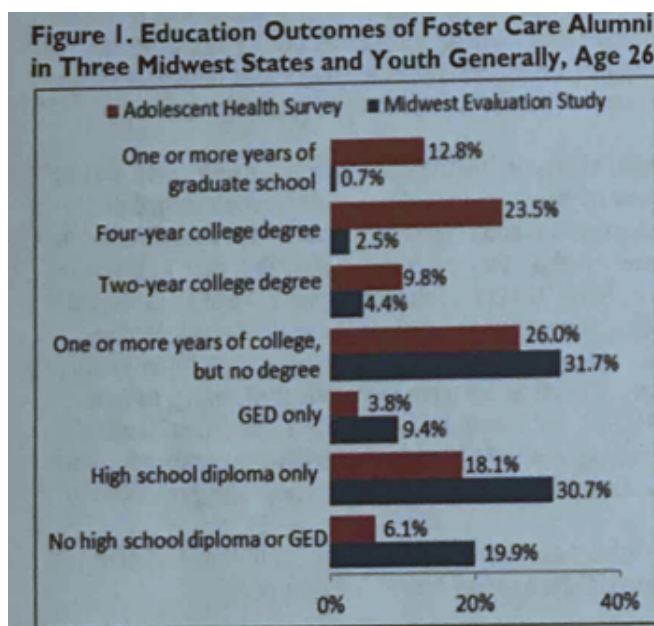


Figure 1: CRS, based on Mark E. Courtney et al., *Midwest Evaluation on the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*, 2011.

### Current Law

In 2002, the Educational and Training Voucher Program of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee) became law, providing eligible foster youth federal assistance to support their education and training goals. (42 U.S.C. §677, 2015). Chafee funds are provided to states, who administer up to \$5,000 per year to eligible foster youth in colleges or accredited vocational or training programs. According to the law, foster youth are eligible if they are in foster care beyond the age of

18 or “aging out of foster care” (42 U.S.C. §677, 2015). Eligible youth can receive \$5,000 a year until the age of 21 or 23 if they are making satisfactory academic progress. More recently, on June 20, 2017, Congress passed H.R. 2847 that would expand eligibility of ETV support by 3 years, from age 23 to 26. The Senate should pass this bill to enable foster youth students who delay enrollment due to circumstances that are no fault of their own to have the opportunity to receive ETV funding for higher education any time before the age of 26. With this bill and many others in the pipeline, much is still needed to be done for foster youth to persist in postsecondary education.

Many states have developed tuition waiver programs to further assist foster youth attending college. Tuition waiver policies at the state level has been proven successful in supporting foster youth in higher education. For example, in Maryland, eligible foster youth are supported with free-tuition to attend college if they meet several requirements such as, have applied for FAFSA, attend a state school in Maryland, been adopted before their 13th birthday, and is a Maryland resident (North American Council on Adoptable Children, n.d.). Similarly, Florida’s eligible foster youth are offered free tuition for public colleges in Florida until the age of 28 (Fla. Stat. § 1001.706(1)(c)). Kentucky also offers full tuition waivers to foster youth. In addition to public colleges in Kentucky, the state provides foster youth with the opportunity to seek education in other states, but must pay the difference (NACAC, n.d.). All states are not as supportive as the states mentioned above, which highlights the need for a national reform to provide funding to all foster youth regardless of the state in which they reside.

### Policy Recommendations

- Congress should increase the ETV amount from \$5,000 to \$10,000 to account for rise in tuition, living expenses, and other costs.

While in college, foster youth are not excluded from paying rent for on and off-campus housing. Moreover, they are required to pay for books, school supplies, and other miscellaneous items. Independent Living Programs in each state can assist with a certain amount of expenses before a youth’s 21st birthday. Beyond the age of 21, foster youth must seek financial assistance from other resources, such as an outside organization like the John Burton Foundation that provide eligible foster youth with a small stipend to help alleviate the cost of books.

Increasing the amount from \$5,000 to \$10,000 for eligible foster youth in college can mitigate homelessness and help ease their financial burden. The majority of foster youth attend community colleges and public 4-year universities. The National Center on Education Statistics reported that tuition at public 4-year institutions has increased from \$9,196 in 2002 to \$18,632 in 2015 (NCES, 2016). Tuition has increased substantially since the beginning of the ETV Program in 2002. Congress should

## Funding Returned to the Treasury for the Education and Training Voucher ETV Program

	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013
Total amount and share of ETV Funds awarded to jurisdictions that were returned	\$2,098,492 (4.6%)	\$1,482,704 (3.4%)	\$1,416,195 (3.2%)	\$1,747,853 (3.9%)	\$599,842 (1.3%)	\$1,109,495 (2.5%)	\$1,222,613 (2.7%)	\$1,561,711 (3.7%)

Source: Congressional Research Service, based on information provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2008-2016.

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remove financial barriers for youth pursuing higher education by increasing the ETV amounts to account for the increase in college expenses.

“In FY2013, the 50 states, Puerto Rico, Washington, DC, and three tribes received \$41.6 million in federal funds for ETVs, of which 21 jurisdictions collectively returned \$1.6 million (3.8 percent)” (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016). One way to ensure that youth receive the support they need is to reallocate unspent ETV funds that some states are returning to the U.S. Treasury.

According to updated congressional reports there have been an average of 16,775 foster youth training voucher recipients every year from 2008 to 2013 (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016). These changes would not only increase the attendance and success of foster youth in college, but it would diminish the likelihood for homelessness and low college attainment, which are futures that foster youth are more susceptible to take than other youth who are not in the child welfare system.

Congressional members should increase the amount that foster youth can receive from ETV to provide resources for transportation, housing, and other school related expenses. Public four-year institutions have rose 33 percent from 2004 - 2015 (NCES, 2016). The ETV funds have not been in alignment with the increasing cost of higher education since its inception.

Moreover, GAO should study the total amount of student loans foster youth acquire despite the aid from the state and federal government.

- **Congress should amend the ETV to include the provision to allow foster youth to pay for pre-college expenses.**

Policy experts suggest that more foster youth would be able to enroll in college if they had more support during their transition from high school to college. Congress could address this need by creating an opt-in to the ETV benefit prior to foster youth receiving their GED. This would enable youth during high school to take prerequisite courses needed for college entrance. In addition to the critical financial assistance this policy would provide, it also would help connect youth to important information and encourage them to explore their options by visiting and comparing college’s financial packages and campus resources. College visits, applications, college-prep courses, and pre-college exams can be very expensive collectively for youth who may not have financial support from their parents. In fact, US News reported that the average college application fee is \$41 (Smith-Barrow, 2014). College exams like SAT and ACT cost \$50 and \$35 respectively and housing and tuition deposits range from \$50 - \$500 (Scott, 2013).

The Chafee program - a capped entitlement available for independent living services (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016) should be amended to include certain pre-college expenses in the definition of “independent living” expenses. This recommendation could be financed through three alternative means: 1) the funding returned to the Treasury for the ETV Program; 2) a portion of funding from the first year of the ETV \$5,000 disbursement; or 3) states would be required to provide funding for foster youth who apply for these special funds.

Foster youth with college aspirations are limited by factors beyond their control. By modifying existing postsecondary tools, Congress can enhance the effectiveness of these policies, and ensure that foster youth like me who graduate from college are not anomalies.



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# Reducing the Number of Foster Youth Placements through Youth-Centered Strategies

*Alexis Arambul*

## Executive Summary

Youth-centered foster care placements need to be prioritized by both federal and state child welfare systems. According to the most recent study, the average foster youth will have 3.2 placements throughout their time in foster care (Legal Center for Foster Care Education, 2014). Placement stability enhances the likelihood that a child's needs are met appropriately (Children's Bureau/ACF/DHHS, 2004). Individualized matching of youth in foster care to a caring foster family is being overlooked as a placement strategy, and results in an avoidably high number of placements for children. Members of Congress must support policies that prioritize the best interest of each foster youth when determining a foster family placement. It is a concern because it is costing more than is necessary to find placement stability. After all, every child deserves a safe, loving, and stable family.

## Personal Reflection

I was born in Washington State to a sixteen-year-old who was unable to care for me. At the age of two, I was adopted by my great aunt. Despite her seemingly good intentions, it was not the loving home that was imagined for me, and I consequently missed out on many childhood experiences such as hanging out with friends and attending school events. At fifteen years old, I finally confided in another family member about the abuse and neglect I endured and was removed from the home. The relief I felt when I was first removed from my great aunt's care was short lived and quickly followed by a haze of confusion and disappointment for the next three years. I bounced around to three unstable foster care placements and attended five different high schools. I was still a senior in high school when I was kicked out of my last foster home and it was just two weeks after my eighteenth birthday, leaving me homeless for the next five months before I started college. This was the most turbulent time in my life.

Although each of my foster care placements were with family members, the foster care system failed by placing me with kin that were a product of the same unsafe environment I had grown up in. I am positive that if my social workers had taken into consideration my individual needs and well-being, I would have been placed with a secure and loving family from the start and would have experienced more stability. There is an assumption that placing foster youth with family members is in the youth's best interest. However, I know firsthand that is not always the case, and because of this foster care placements need to be made in the best interest of each individual. I was an exception.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

Using evidence-based research, improving kinship licensing standards and working with state governments, we can implement a system that improves quality and reduces the number of foster care placements. My recommendations are as follows:

- **Require state child welfare agencies to use youth-centered recruitment models based on evidence-based strategies and best practice models.**
- **Collect quantitative data from states who utilize technological services targeted to child welfare agencies to help match children with foster families.**

## The Problem

There is a tendency in the U.S. foster care system to view all foster youth as the same. The system fails to recognize that each individual is different and has specific needs. The current guidelines regarding placement do not allow for implementation that is individualized. To place children into homes with inadequate knowledge about their specific circumstances and needs is doing a disservice to those children. Lack of data and implementation of evidence-based strategies also contributes to this problem, leaving foster youth vulnerable to placement instability.

The first 18 years of a youth's life are vital to how an individual will interact with the society around them. Experiences with adults in a child's life help shape who they become and determine if and how youth develop into productive members of society. According to the 2015 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) report, the average age a child enters foster care is nine years old. The Child Development Institute describes in depth why each stage in child's development is vital. From age six to twelve it states, "Learning to make good choices and exercising self-discipline does not come easy for many. Parents need to impart a moral code that the child gradually internalizes." When a child experiences multiple placements, they miss out on learning this important life skill. Additionally, the Institute points out that youth aged 13 to 18, "need their parents more than ever. Research shows that a positive family environment including family activities, open parent-child communication, and the encouragement to participate in positive extracurricular and community activities, teens are able to navigate these years with relative ease" (Child Development Institute, 2015). It is clear that if a child lacks these experiences, it will follow them into adult life which in turn, affects society as a whole.



Source: Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

There are several barriers that an adolescent faces upon aging-out of foster care that their peers are less likely to experience. According to FosterClub, consequent to transitioning into adult life 1 in 5 foster youth will become homeless, only half will be employed by the age of 24, 71 percent of young women will be pregnant by 21, and 1 in 4 will experience PTSD (FosterClub, 2008). Foster youth also face many obstacles in their academic life. The Children's Defense Fund notes that, "over one third of young adults report having five or more school changes while in foster care" (Teraro, 2010). According to the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 56-75 percent of foster youth change schools when first entering care, only 50 percent complete high school, 20 percent go to college, and of that 20 percent, only 2-9 percent attain a bachelor's degree (Legal Center, 2014). Another study of young adults in foster care found that more than half had experienced seven or more school changes from elementary through high school (Teraro, 2010). Research shows how drastic the consequences of not receiving a proper and fair education have on the foster youth community. For example, foster

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youth are also more prone to becoming incarcerated. The article, Latent classes of older foster youth: Prospective associations with outcomes and exits from the foster care system, during the transition to adulthood describes, “results indicate that children with multiple placements, multiple spells in care, and children who have placement experiences supervised by probation following their child welfare involvement had a higher risk of incarceration for a serious or violent offense” (Miller et al., 2017). Multiple foster placements can have physical effects on a foster youth. Some of the most damaging of these includes mental and emotional instability, the continuity of high-stress environments, and having to constantly refamiliarize yourself is emotionally demanding. The UC Davis Center for Human Services states, “It was found that multiple placements increased the probability of high mental health service use” (University of California Davis Center for Human Services, 2008).

Lastly, multiple placements are cost ineffective to states and child welfare agencies. Foster Care Technologies research shows that it costs approximately \$1,619 to find a placement each time a child has to be moved from an existing foster home to a new one (ECAP, 2016). By reducing the number of foster care placements, federal funding could be used more efficiently for foster youth services, ultimately resulting in fewer federal dollars spent.

### **Current Law**

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (110-351) Section 104 states, “a waiver of any such standard may be made only on a case-by-case basis for non-safety standards (as determined by the state) in relative foster family homes for specific children in care” (P.L. 110-351). The kinship licensing standards are successful in that they were designed to ensure greater permanency and protect the well being of foster youth.

The Reducing Barriers for Relative Foster Care Act (H.R. 2866) recently passed in June of 2017 in the U.S. House of Representatives and features well thought out prevention services that gives states flexibility to use federal dollars to prevent inappropriate foster care placements. Under this Act, “The State shall submit to the Secretary information addressing whether the State licensing standards are in accord with model standards identified by the Secretary, and if not, the reason for the specific deviation and a description as to why having a standard that is reasonably in accord with the corresponding national model standards is not appropriate for the State” (P.L. 2866). This means that children would be placed more efficiently and into permanent, impervious homes. States would also report what standards it most commonly waives as well as why it doesn’t waive others. A final component of this Act reports on how caseworkers are trained to use their discretion to ensure they are able to make correct judgments when placing a child with kin and a description of the steps the state is taking to improve caseworker training, if any.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- **Require state child welfare agencies to use youth-centered recruitment models based on evidence-based strategies and best practice models.**

### **Amend the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008**

In the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, the lack of a definition of “non-safety” is a problem. Although states are required under this bill to report the types of non-safety standards waived for kinship placements, it leaves the definition of non-safety ambiguous. This leads me to believe that virtually anything regarding abuse by kinship placement can be waived leaving a foster child vulnerable to unreported abuse. In 2012, an estimated 4,795 perpetrators of child abuse and/or neglect were foster parents and legal guardians (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Placement stability should be a primary factor in a youth-centered approach, but ensuring a safe and loving environment should be equally prioritized. Although it is understood

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that keeping the child within the family unit is the ultimate goal of the child welfare system, it is not always the best decision and to allow children to fall through the cracks is unjustifiable.

### **Implement a Child-Focused Recruitment Model**

A youth-centered foster care placement approach would focus on identifying quality caregivers interested in providing for the emotional, physical, and psychological needs of the youth. A child-focused recruitment model based on best practices is essential to reducing the amount of placements that a foster youth faces as well as making sure that they are provided with a safe and loving family. The Dave Thomas Foundation is a prime example of successful placement. According to Rita Soronen the president of this non-profit foundation, placement of foster youth has a “history of anecdotal rather than evidenced-based development” (personal communication, June 26, 2017). More than 30 percent of the children in the program had already been in six or more placements and 9 percent experienced 10 or more placements. Taking on the most vulnerable at-risk children and allotting grants to adoption agencies that follow their strategy, they are able to give social workers smaller caseloads. Caseworkers are able to develop personal relationships with each child individually and determine what placement accommodates their needs. The child-focused approach also means caseworkers are required to meet with the child at least once a month, dive into their case file, and input data on the child. This evidenced-based approach to matching foster youth to families has seen a lot of success for at-risk children who are a part of the program. They are 1.7 times more likely to be adopted (Dave Thomas, 2017). Implementation of this approach is necessary because it ensures that even the most at-risk youth are provided with a stable family.

- **Collect quantitative data from states who utilize technological services targeted to child welfare agencies to help match children with foster families.**

Data and research are imperative in assessing the outcomes of foster youth and why they experience a lack of stability. Foster Care Tech believes that research and data are necessary to understanding why children experience multiple placements. Using data to develop technologies and algorithms for child welfare state agencies can improve the outcomes for children in foster care. With the Every Child a Priority System (ECAP), “placement recommendations are generated by algorithms that are based on statistical analyses of key child characteristics and how those characteristics have related to past placement and failures”. Children placed with ECAP have fewer disruptions, 22.5 percent better placement stability, and spend 12 percent less time in foster care. The impact that a tool like this could have would reap positive outcomes for foster youth nationally.

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# Low Hanging Fruit: Harnessing the Data States Already Collect

*Htet Htet Rodgers*

## Executive Summary

The child welfare field keeps track of child information in multiple ways, and the data reside across a myriad of systems at the state and federal level. However, we do not have a database that holds all of a single youth's information and where the aggregated information of youth in care can be analyzed to develop new programs and platforms. For example, state public child welfare agencies are required to maintain records of all foster youth and alumni foster youth across the nation. These records are called case plans and are stored in case-management systems, which can be preserved online, in hard copy, or both. In addition, states are required by federal law to report foster care and child welfare data to the AFCARS and NCANDS data programs. The data from these reports is also kept in different types of systems at the state level, including child welfare information systems. Although these data systems have certain shortcomings, they provide a rich source of data about children and youth served by foster care agencies. With today's technology, there is room to further leverage the power of data and technology to provide even more timely and accurate information about the well-being of children and youth in care, and to ensure data-informed decision making.

One area of advancement the field of child welfare needs is a national foster care data taxonomy. A taxonomy is a categorization tool that maps data fields from different systems to a master field set. For example, one system classifies the 'last name' category of a person as a 'surname,' another system classifies the 'last name' as 'family name,' and another as 'last name.' The taxonomy will take all the variations of 'last name' and map the different field names to its master "surname" field that data can be moved between systems efficiently and accurately. This way, when data is imported, each system does not have missing data or an error simply because the 'field name' is not the exact same name as another system. Thus, a taxonomy fixes the problem of file sharing. Another definition for a taxonomy of data is the classifying of a pre-determined system resulting in a catalog used to provide a framework for discussion, analysis, or information retrieval. The platform allows all workers, from social workers to department heads in various states, to share information easily with each other. The taxonomized state records could also be transferred to the federal government regularly to use as a collection of data for various projects and companies who want to develop new platforms for foster youth. The government could create a report that shows a state's weakness and strengths, as well as a national report. An individual youth's information could be made accessible to the foster youth as well, empowering them. At the end of the day, what helps the foster care workers will help foster children. If we can support these workers and assist them through better use of data collection, we can better address the needs of the foster youth. A foster care data taxonomy paves the way to identifying issues and fixing them in a timely manner.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

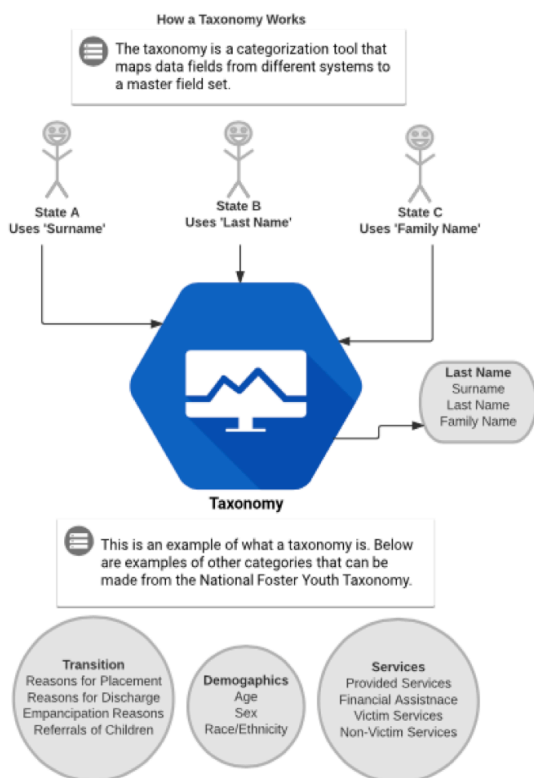
- Create a national foster youth taxonomy so that transferring data between states is easier.
- Require states to transfer data annually to the federal government so it can produce a public report.
- Create accounts for foster youth with the taxonomy, so they can access their records when needed.



## Personal Reflection

Working for the Department of Child and Family Services as a Peer Support Representative, I had the privilege of seeing how a case-managing system works first hand. The system was solely for the independent living provider that I worked for. Case noting itself was a tedious task. There was always work brought home so that case notes could be typed in by the end of the day. Whenever we submitted

files and audits to the Department of Child and Family Services, we had to print out every single note to put into the files, and at times the files went missing or would be incomplete when they returned. I recall times where we had to wait several weeks to receive a new case file from another region in our own state. That process was even longer if the youth came from another state. And at times, these files had the chance of being lost. Also my job required that I facilitate the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) surveys to various youths around the state of Louisiana (The National Youth in Transition Database). The NYTD survey was authorized by Congress in 1999 with the goal of collecting more information about the well-being of youth who are transitioning from foster care. Youth participation in the survey is voluntary. States did not begin collecting NYTD data until 2011 (Supporting Summer Youth Employment Programs, 2017).



In my experience, many times, the foster youth declined parts or all the survey or refused to talk to us to complete the survey. This caused inaccurate data or an incomplete survey. Currently sitting as a NYTD reviewer for the Children's Bureau, I am honored to have the opportunity to go with the Bureau and review states on their foster youth aging out population. Analyzing the data has shown

me, from my experience of collecting the incomplete survey results, that there needs to be another way to collect this data in a more efficient way. The NYTD survey also only gathers information from an aged 17-to-21-year-old bracket, whereas my proposal is suggesting states to submit data for all ages of children and youth who are served by public child welfare agencies. From personal and work experience, foster youth feel more empowered whenever they know what is going with their case. Having the taxonomy can give foster youth the opportunity to access their information whenever they want. So, if the foster youth happens to move, they already have all their information ready to be accessed to be used at whatever new school, hospital, or DCFS building they encounter. Or, if the foster youth is about to age out, they have everything from their demographics and case plan to their medical information and education information with direct access. The youth would then have the knowledge of their medical history to give to the doctor for their next checkup or can see what their test scores are to apply for secondary education (Procedural Operations Manual (POM), 2011).

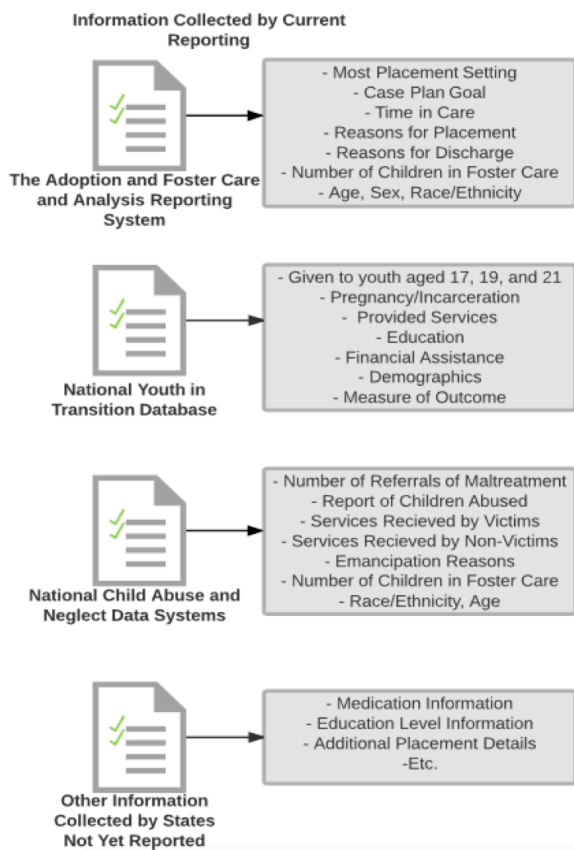
## Current Law

Currently, there is no consistent way to collect data from the demographics of a foster youth to the more detailed sectors like medication and education. A taxonomy will not only allow that data to be

collected, but also improve data integrity since every organization involved will have direct access to the original files. Transferring files between organizations, states, and even within the halls of the DCFS will be made easier through this data uniformity. Currently, the nation has systems like the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS), the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) and NYTD. Working as a service provider, I witnessed Louisiana prepare for the review first hand. There was almost a frenzy because the state must meet all the federal requirements to ensure the safety, permanence and well-being of the youth. The review was an analysis made by the federal government based on Louisiana's case managing information. The analysis showed the state's strengths and weaknesses that was used to develop the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). The PIP was used to address the areas that needed improvement (Getting Ready for the Federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), 2011).

Foster youth are going to move; it is a regular part of life for the majority of foster youth. As they move to their next location, whether it be a new house, new city, or new state, these youths should have a right to access records relating to their case. Pulling their information in a standardized format will allow foster youth to bring their information to life. The taxonomy will allow immediate transfer of documentation to the new state. A foster youth who is aging out can also be given their information to login to their case, so that way they have access to their files and records. At the end of the day, this is all for the child. Giving youth the right to access their information will allow them to know what is going on with their lives and be able to stand up for themselves when it is not in their best interest. My hope is that since this taxonomy will track everything from demographics, to medical records, to life activities, the data drawn can be more accurately used to verify or support the AFCARS, CFSR, NYTD surveys and other programs and platforms that need the information.

Today, there are several reports for certain groups or certain areas of the foster care system. Earlier, I mentioned AFCARS and NYTD. Those two systems have gathered information about foster youth in their own ways, but not every relevant aspect of their life. To be able to provide service for all youth in our nation, there needs to be a system where data can be drawn from. In business, there is a coding system called XBRL used by businesses and governments to transfer information between one another. It is commonly used for business reporting. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation was one of the first users. XBRL "makes reporting more accurate and efficient" in the business world (An Introduction to XBRL, 2017). The system has eliminated language barriers by having pre-defined definitions in the coding process and gives the confidence to users of financial information that the information is accurate and reliable. I propose applying this concept to the child welfare world. Various organizations have created online networks like the National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise (NEICE). NEICE is an electronic system for exchanging child adoption and foster care placement documents and data with states. The system uses the National Information Exchange Model (NIEM) and it "enables organizations to move information across organizational boundaries in order to interoperate and act



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as one while maintain authority of their own existing systems” (Value of NIEM, 2017). A concept that works for data submission, which I mentioned earlier, is CFSR. CFSR is a thorough review implemented by the Children’s Bureau. CFSR is vital because it shows that case-management analysis has brought out a reliable data report so the state can work in its weak areas. The case-management data includes the medication that a foster youth takes or the last grade in school they attend. This data is used to create a PIP so states can improve in their weak areas. Other data submission reports from states are AFCARS and NYTD. A data transfer system, or taxonomy, and data submission reports are used today.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- **Create a national foster youth taxonomy so that transferring data between states is easier.**

The taxonomy system will be based off of the XBRL concept and the NIEM concept. Because NEICE is already a successful program, NEICE can be improved to cover more areas like medication, education and grades, and also the services that a foster youth have been provided. This will allow more information to transfer to states; allowing a share of data and successful programs. The transfer will be a more convenient and accurate way of transferring files locally, state-wide, and across the nation. The Children’s Bureau currently performs CFSR every five years. CFSR also provides Program Improvement Plan (PIP) for states to work on their weaknesses. If you make the information available in a comparative basis, the states can develop their own PIPs and not wait for federal review.

- **Require States to transfer data annually to the federal government to produce a public report.**

Because of the nature of a taxonomy, data can be drawn from the source data. Since the data will be various things like, demographics, attendance of life skills classes, placements, education level, and medical records; more precise data will be available to use for various types research. Congress can make a federal requirement to states to submit the data annually. NYTD and AFCARS are other data reports submitted annually by the states. The federal government can also provide anonymized data to researchers and developers on an ad-hoc basis. This will allow the developers and researchers to have the necessary information to make programs to best suit foster youth.

- **Create accounts for foster youth with the taxonomy, so they can access their records when needed.**

Foster youth are constantly aging out, and the data that the taxonomy collects will allow the foster youth to have their medical records, school records, and demographics. Foster youth preparing to age out or being transferred to another state will have the sense of security that comes from having access to their information when needed.

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# Leveling the Playing Field through Equal Awareness to a World of Educational Opportunity

*Jameshia Shepherd*

## Executive Summary

Addressing the lack of information and awareness regarding educational resources for foster youth is critical to positive outcomes. “Eighty-four percent of traditional college aged foster youth reported wanting to go to college; however, only 20 percent of those who graduated from high school attended college” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, p. 2). It is imperative that we provide foster youth access to educational resources such as: Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA), John H. Chafee Program, Educational Training Voucher (ETV), private scholarships, internship opportunities, vocational training opportunities, and study abroad programs. As a society we must intervene early to ensure youth who experience foster care have positive educational outcomes by providing access to educational resources. “Approximately 1.5 million undergraduates missed out on financial aid opportunities by not completing the FAFSA, and most of these non-applicants were from low-income backgrounds” (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, 2014). Congress has taken action at the federal level through Title IV-E to create opportunities for foster youth seeking higher education, but despite their efforts, gaps exist in notifying youth in foster care about educational resources.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

**Congress should Amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to:**

- **Mandate that an educational and career expert participate at biannual case planning meetings for youth in care starting at age 14, and ensure accountability through the case review process.**
- **Ensure that youth who are preparing to exit foster care are aware and utilizing educational resources, Congress should strengthen the time period for planning and completing the transition plan by including an educational plan with the youth’s assigned case planning educational expert 365 days before the youth exits care.**

## Personal Reflection

As a young child, I had dreams of becoming the president of the United States. I knew I had to attend higher education and obtain a degree to achieve this dream. My aspirations and goals were clear. As a foster youth and first-generation college student, I felt invisible as I repeatedly spoke about my goals and dreams to high school counselors, college advisors, Michigan Health and Human Services (HHS) workers, private agency foster care workers and local non-profit agency professionals. At the time, none of these individuals “on my team” took me seriously when planning my future. My HHS worker and my private agency worker were familiar with my goals, because they were present at multiple case planning meetings. Despite multiple systems and institutions knowing about my goals and aspirations to attend a university, no one provided me with resources. Due to the fact that I had no financial support or resources, I had to leave my dream school, Wayne State University, and return home to my community college where the tuition cost less. I felt discouraged and let down.

The following semester, I met with the community college financial aid office, which is where I came across a brochure for foster youth that highlighted educational resources. After the years I spent in the foster care system and all the case planning meetings, I was in disbelief that I was unaware of the education resources that were available to me.



This brochure led me to a world of educational opportunities and an associate's degree at my local community college. However, what are the chances that other foster youth will get lucky and stumble upon the appropriate resources that will move them towards their success? Because I was one of the few lucky ones, in May of 2017, I was proud to receive my masters in social work from Michigan State University.

### The Problem

As a licensed social worker, foster care alumni and advocate, I have multiple perspectives and the ability to see the full scope of the problem. Through my lens, I have found that many foster youths are unaware of the higher education resources that are available. Oftentimes I hear statements from foster youth on how they are working full time jobs to save enough money, so

her or she can attend college. These statements make me cringe, because the availability of resources are not fully communicated.

Research shows that foster youth educational outcomes fall short when measured against their peers (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016, p.11). Case planning is at the center of securing permanency for every foster youth in care. Currently, the case plan must include a plan for safety, housing type, health information, and education stability efforts. Although the case plan outlines education stability, it does not speak to any higher educational resources or attainment. Higher educational resources and opportunities are essential to the case planning process; since every child in care has a future. Being a part of the child welfare system through no fault of their own makes foster youth eligible for opportunities that help level the playing field to individuals who are not in care. Access to higher education is the foundation and needs to be at the center of the case planning process as much as housing, health, and education stability. As Malcolm X said, "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today."

The overall poor educational outcomes of foster youth create negatives beliefs for others in care. Professionals working with foster youth must be aware of the negative connotations so that they can ensure they are being inclusive. Foster youth are directly involved in various systems including the courts, school counselors, therapists, foster care workers, and parents. Yet, there is still a lack of encouragement for youth to seek higher education. As a result, foster youth embodies low expectations and negatively affects their future. "The system does not always stress that you need to do well in school to graduate and go to college and that has to be the priority" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, p. 3).

Although the responsibility is on the foster care workers to implement and complete the plan, courts should also be held accountable. A researcher for the National Conference of State Legislatures reported that "lines of responsibility and accountability for the educational outcomes of children in foster care are unclear" and that, often, "no single person or agency ultimately is held accountable for results" (Lip, 2007). No one is being held accountable for the poor outcomes of foster youth as it relates to attaining higher education. There needs to be a change on how we provide access and awareness to higher educational resources and opportunities.



### Services provided to youth by category, FFY 2012



*National Youth in Transition Database, 2013*

#### Current Law

Federal law requires the development of a written case plan for any child receiving foster care maintenance payments under title IV-E (42 U.S.C. 671(16)) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). A case plan is required when a child welfare agency places a child in out-of-home care to assess the child's current placement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Currently, the scope of the case plan addresses efforts to maintain the child's educational stability while in foster care. It does not address the planning and preparation for postsecondary education and opportunities. While this case plan is developed when the child enters foster care, every 6 months a child's case is subjected to case review through an administrative process (Stoltzfus, 2012, p.21). Under the case review system, each child in foster care has a permanency hearing - held in court or by a court administered body - no later than 12 months after the child enters foster care and every 12 months after that while the child remains in care" (Stoltzfus, 2012, p.21). The case planning process must be the starting point to connect youth to educational opportunities, and while holding the system accountable to ensure professionals carry out policy as intended.

Once a youth reaches a certain age without permanency and reunification as the goal, a transition plan is developed to successfully transition foster youth into adulthood (Stoltzfus, 2012). Under title IV-E Section 471, there is a requirement that all youth in care at the age of 16 or older develop a transition plan 90 days prior to the date youth exit the child welfare system.

#### Policy Recommendations

**Congress should Amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to:**

- Mandate that an educational and career expert participate at biannual case planning meetings for youth in care starting at age 14, and ensure accountability through the case review process.

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Congress should require an educational and career expert to be present at biannual case planning meetings starting at age 14. This coincides with existing policy that strengthens youth engagement in the case planning process, such as the provisions in the Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113-183) that require youth learn about their rights starting at age 14. Having an educational and career expert directly involved in case planning meetings will ensure that the educational opportunities are explained and individualized to each foster youth adequately. The educational expert should be prepared with resources to reflect opportunities from the federal, state, and local level. To ensure accountability, the courts should review educational resources of the case plan during annual court permanency hearings.

- **Ensure that youth who are preparing to exit foster care are aware and utilizing educational resources, Congress should strengthen the time period for planning and completing the transition plan by including an educational plan with the youth's assigned case planning educational expert 365 days before the youth exits care.**

It's been well documented that 90 days is not a sufficient amount of time for a youth to plan and develop a transition plan to higher education. Most states require the transition planning to begin starting at age 16 which allows youth in care to focus on their higher education and career opportunities by age 17. The transition plan should include specific language when discussing educational resources to federal and state scholarships, internships, vocational programs, etc. Most higher education scholarship and opportunities require many months of planning. Congress must create the opportunity for youth to plan earlier and have access and support to educational resources just like their peers. There are many factors that goes into being adult and a 90-day period does not suffice the extensive preparation needed to properly set up a young adult for success. Furthermore, since accessing higher education would not be on the top of the priority list other items may take precedence causing higher education to not be fully explored.

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# Simply Put: We Deserve Quality

*Tiffany Boyd*

## Executive Summary

The Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The unfortunate fact for thousands of foster youth is that these rights are not accessible to us depending on our geographic location, type of placement, and the level of support that we receive while in care. Every child in foster care is deserving of quality care and services that are sufficient to meet their individual needs but the current system is flawed and not working as well as it has the potential to. This is not only costly to society, it is also costly to the individual youth already traumatized in the system.

Although current law requires that a case plan be shared with the courts who are mandated to oversee these cases during the annual case

review hearings, the current system is void of the types of checks and balances that are necessary to ensure that someone is taking responsibility for the quality of care that a child receives while in the custody of the state. The lack of accountability for quality of foster care services is a problem that not only affects individual lives of youth in care, but ultimately puts a strain and added burden on the entire system as a whole. I propose federal policy changes that would transform the stakeholders into stockholders, enabling young people in foster care to participate in creating more quality of care that will lead to better outcomes for youth everywhere.



When billions of federal funds a year are spent to ensure the safety, permanency and wellbeing of children in our nation’s foster care system, and nearly 21,000 young people age out of foster care each year without having achieved permanency - many of whom will rely on adult-serving public systems -- policy makers need to re-assess the quality of services being delivered to youth in foster care. In particular, policy makers should examine how to build on existing quality measures, such as those in the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

- Congress must direct the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish an expert panel that includes researchers, program directors, parents, youth, and other community partners to reassess the CFSR measures as they pertain to the quality of care standard.
- Congress needs to examine the outcomes of state CFSRs and Performance Improvement Plans and develop policies such as incentives, to ensure that states do more to improve the quality of services for children and youth in foster care. Federal policies could establish certain standards for quality of services, similar to how the federal government established quality of care standards for federally funded health services; states who exceed the standard in the CFSR should be allotted an incentive payment or an increased matching rate.

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- Congress should require each state agency responsible for overseeing the care of our children to establish within their charter, a commission comprised of stakeholders including but not limited to current and emancipated clients, legal guardians, custodial grandparents, and parents who lost then regained the custody of their children, elected government officials, representatives of state agencies. Every director should meet with this commission regularly to utilize these individuals' first-hand experience and specialized knowledge as it pertains to navigating the system and needs to require the consent of the commission when introducing new strategies, implementing new policies, and seeking innovative ideas to transform the child welfare system.

## Personal Reflection

Although some say I have been fortunate, as it pertains to the support I was provided, it took me several years to 'get my life together' and live beyond the pain and trauma that I had experienced. When removed from our mother's care, my experience was far different than that of my other six siblings. While I was placed in the custody of my grandmother who advocated heavily against any treatment that required prescription medications, removal from the family, or incarceration - my sisters and brothers were not as fortunate. My other siblings had entirely different experiences. My brother was removed from the home at the age of seven and was sent to a group home miles away from our family. We were all separated and put into various types of placements; such as group homes and treatment facilities. In the coming years after my father's passing, my brother's behavioral issues had gotten him into lots of trouble, as had mine. By the time he was taken into foster care we had both been labeled troublemakers. Instead of dealing with these issues, he was medicated during his time away from our family and returned to us at the age of 17 with nearly the same mental capacity that he had when he had left the home at seven, a trash bag full of old clothes, and a bible. I, on the other hand, had the assistance of my grandmother, received counseling, and was provided with love and support.

Upon emancipating from the system, I was notified of the many services for which I would be eligible for, including Independent Living Program (ILP), the Chafee grant, transitional housing, and was even given a mentor. With the support that I received, I was able to complete high school, attend college, and have been advocating on behalf of child welfare reform since emancipating from the system. I am considered to be the lucky one for having a loving grandmother to provide for me, for going to college, and possessing the ability to break the cycle of abuse that I was born into. Unfortunately, at this point in my life, I cannot agree. I do not believe that it is ok - nor appropriate to consider me to be lucky or an exception for having someone in my corner who loved me; this should be the standard. If I was asked what our youth in care need, I would respond, the same thing your children need - the same things you needed as a child - and they deserve for someone to take full responsibility for them regardless of their geographic location or level of development.

## The Problem

While according to the Legal Center for Foster Youth Education, only roughly 20% of foster youth who graduated from high school attend college, only between 6% and 9% obtain a bachelor's degree (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Although the foster youth population is not heavily present in the education system, we experience high levels of homelessness, mental health issues, sex trafficking, etc. This issue should be addressed from a preventative stand point, so that when these young adults emancipate they actually have a chance to live a happy, healthy, and productive life as a contributing member of society; as promised in the Declaration of Independence. There are too many post transition age youth and adults who have not received the love, care, and support that they needed while in care - too many former fosters in the prison system and too many adults who never were given the chance to heal after a life in care. Many times, people are taken from their families and placed in situations that are far worst and more traumatic than the ones they were 'rescued' from; this is a problem.

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The fact that after age 24, or maybe even earlier for youth in some states, we are thrust in to the world with little or no supports or, services, and none of the safeguards that our non-foster youth counterparts have the privilege of experiencing - so it's no wonder that outcomes among foster youth are extremely poor.

Good services equal good outcomes and bad services can unfortunately lead to tragedy in many cases. I had a friend who killed himself last year, because he never received the mental health services that he was so deserving of and the personal successes that he was able to achieve were not enough to keep him from jumping off of the tallest building that he could find. He emancipated from the system with severe issues that he was unable to face alone but if he had received the mental health services that he was so deserving of perhaps he would be alive today. With system level changes to improve service, many young people who deserve the opportunity to can live long and productive lives. The assistance that a young person receives when transitioning from care often differentiates depending on the type of case that they have, where they are geographically located, and the level of support that they experience. Many of these young people who have been placed on these psychotropic medications become dependent on them beyond their time in care and frequently experience physical, mental, and psychological effects that disable them from later becoming contributing members of society.

Unlike my siblings, I was able to take advantage of the opportunities that the state of California provides for its emancipated foster youth that were not available to my siblings. Due to the status of my brother Brandon's case (despite being raised in the exact same situation) he was unable to receive the same services that were allotted to me. Like thousands of other youth emancipating from the system, between the limited support system that they had available, the medications that he received, and the labels that were placed upon him while he was in care - neither of my older brothers were able to take advantage of the services I was granted access to. The quality of services can make a critical difference in the lives of youth.

### **Current Law**

Every few years, the HHS Children's Bureau conducts a Child and Family Service Review (CFSR). This is a periodic review of state child welfare systems to achieve three goals: ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements, determine what is actually happening to children and families as they are engaged in child welfare services, and assist states in helping children and families achieve positive outcomes. After a CFSR is completed, states develop a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address areas in their child welfare services that need improvement. A summary by DHHS of 52 state PIPs (Children's Bureau, 2012) shows many areas that need attention with regard to safety, permanency and well-being. For example, not one state was in "conformity" with one of the CFSR's permanency measures.

Congressional policy makers have demonstrated a strong interest in creating positive outcomes for children and youth in foster care, and they would benefit from having involvement with the data generated by the CFSRs to that they can determine how to adjust policies or financing to ensure the best possible quality of services and outcomes. Congressional policy makers may want to create more accountability to ensure that federal financing is leveraged for the highest quality of services that this most vulnerable population should receive as a ward of the court. If we look at the statistics that exist within the post transition age population, such as the extremely high rates of homelessness and incarceration, it is clear that the bare minimum level of care is not enough.

Under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, state and federal expenditures for foster care annually exceed \$9 billion (Child Trends, 2014). How this money is distributed and ultimately spent should be



reassessed and evaluated to ensure that we are looking at the quality of these services and not just assuming that quality and spending totals correlate. There is no established standard of what quality services look like leaving us incapable of treating each child with the dignity and respect that they deserve despite their geographic location, and personal issues, or limitations. The level of quality should not vary by state but instead be a baseline for every youth and child in the country. This should be a federal mandate without exception and can be tied to the financial support that each state receives from the federal government.

If I am not mistaken, I believe that the saying is - “so goes California, goes the rest of the nation.” In California, we have started a movement. With the support of Congresswoman Karen Bass (D-CA), The National Foster Youth Institute, and each other - we - as former clients have begun doing the work and making the steps towards changing the child welfare system. Although there is still a long way to go, we have decided that we are important enough take this on as our own issue and to provide for ourselves all of the things we never received while in care. We gathered like-minded individuals, figured out what issues we would like to collectively take on, developed a plan of action, and have begun advocating for and providing for ourselves since we cannot wait for the state to do it for us. We made a list of the local legislators, separated them by who is responsible for what, and began advocating and inserting ourselves in the political process in an effort to help them help us; while simultaneously creating the family structure and support systems that we feel that we need. We have gone to the Commission for Children and Families, the Los Angeles City Council, the Board of Supervisors, and were recently invited to provide input to the Counties’ Human Resources office on what attributes the next director of DCFS should have. In 2010, California enacted the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, which allows the state to continue to receive federal financial support for the care of youth in foster care until the age of 21. In addition, federal law requires states to provide Medicaid coverage until age 26 for youth who age out of foster care. Title IV-E current child welfare law doesn’t speak to quality. There is no current law that I can find that speaks to the quality of care that a young person receives.

State Performance on Permanency Outcomes			
<b>Substantial Conformity:</b>			
•0 States in substantial conformity on Permanency Outcome 1			
•7 States in substantial conformity on Permanency Outcome 2			
<b>Case Ratings:</b>			
	Low	Median	High
Permanency 1	7.1%	50.9%	92%
Permanency 2	37.9%	77.3%	94.3%

Children’s Bureau, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/pip-presentation>

#### Policy Recommendations

- Congress should direct HHS to establish an expert panel that includes researchers, program directors, parents, youth, and other community partners to reassess the CFSR measures as they pertain to the quality of care standard.

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- Congress should examine the outcomes of state CFSRs and Performance Improvement Plans and develop policies such as incentives, to ensure that states do more to improve the quality of services for children and youth in foster care. Federal policies could establish certain standards for quality of services, similar to how the federal government established quality of care standards for federally funded health services; states who exceed the standard in the CFSR should be allotted an incentive payment or an increased matching rate.

- Congress should require each state agency responsible for overseeing the care of our children to establish within their charter, a commission or body of individuals, comprised of stakeholders including but not limited to current and emancipated clients, legal guardians, custodial grandparents, and parents who lost then regained the custody of their children - Including the United States government. Every director, should meet with this commission regularly to utilize these individuals' first-hand experience and specialized knowledge as it pertains to navigating the system and needs to require the consent of the commission when introducing new strategies, implementing new policies, and seeking innovative ideas to transform the child welfare system.

These policy recommendations will help government officials and the director of each states' child welfare system by offering them the experience and expertise of those who have the first-hand experience in an effort to assist them in providing quality services to the young people they are charged with taking care of. We are working towards implementing such a system in California. By recommendation of former clients, a commission is being put in place through order of the Board of Supervisors.

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# Virtual Success Coaches: Connecting Foster Youth with Modern Technology

*Eden Harris*

## Executive Summary

Youth in foster care do not always have the strategies or encouragement they need to succeed. Case workers have large caseloads and may not have time to provide guidance or support that older youth need to successfully transition out of foster care. Foster parents may not have had the training on what older youth need. The result is nearly 21,000 young people age out of foster care each year, generally at the age of 18, and they are unprepared for the realities of life (AFCARS, 2015). For example, one in five will become homeless after age 18 (FosterClub, 2014). Only 65 percent report having employment experience by age 21 (National Youth in Transition Database, 2016). Each of these statistics represent a drag on the U.S. economy, but more importantly, the foster care system fails to prepare girls and boys in its care to be independent, successful contributors to society. This report makes the case that the federal government should test a coaching model that involves trained virtual “success coaches” who work directly with young people to support successful outcomes. This will include creating an innovative virtual platform that speaks the language of millennials.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

- Congress should fund a competitive pilot program that assigns virtual success coaches to millennials/ generation Z between ages 14 and 18 using a virtual platform.
- Congress should extend federal loan forgiveness to eligible success coaches to encourage the participation of highly qualified individuals.

## Personal Reflection

“What if you did not have to fake it to make it?” “What if you could make it, just being yourself?” “As a child music has always been my safe place and at the age of 18 my dream came true. At the age of 18, I was accepted into Berklee College of Music in Boston. This school is second to Juilliard. It is the Sandford to Harvard. For me, this school represented prestige, success, and the opportunity to release the negative stigma of being a foster youth. Berklee’s acceptance conditions required that I attend their summer program with the price tag of \$20,000. At the time, I did not have the financial nor parental resources to raise these much-needed funds. I had no one in my life to coach me on how to surmount this seemingly impossible obstacle. As a result the triggers of my youth surfaced. Those triggers were rejection, insecurities of not being enough and being utterly alone. Thus, I took on meaningless jobs, attended a school that was not of my choice, and subsequently dropped out, losing the will to sing.

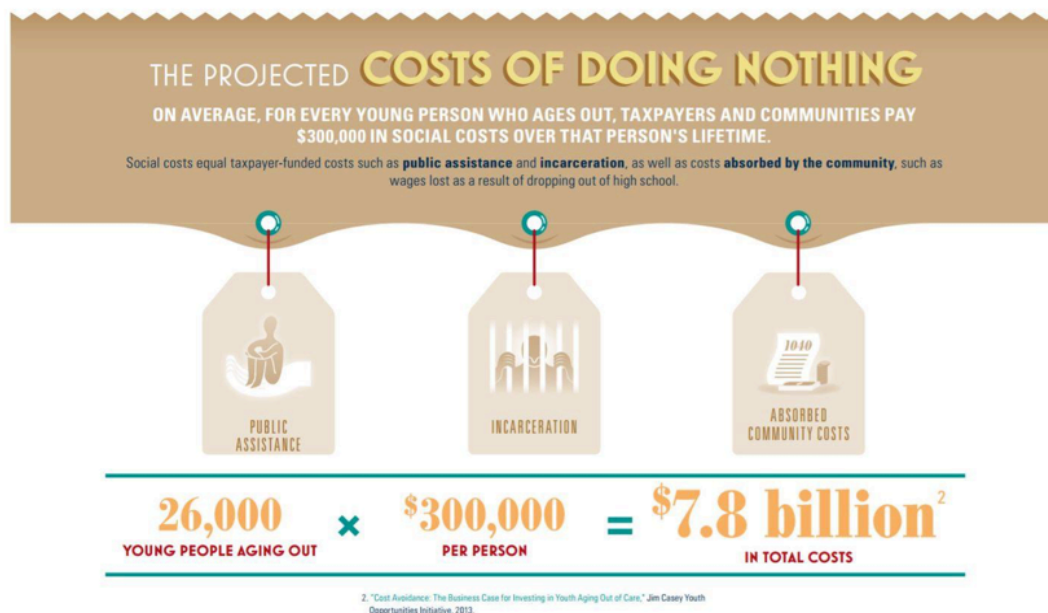
By happenstance, I met Stedman Graham at Howard University and he encouraged me to go back to school but as a business major. He ignited a spark in me to go to school to fulfill my passion and my dream. Mr. Graham’s efforts to coach me into a successful future tie closely to the role of a success coach. I had many amazing therapists whose primary focus was to help heal me from childhood trauma. But there was not a plan for my career goals.

Too many foster youth fall through the cracks because they do not have a success coach to guide them in life. This lack of support has led to poor outcomes for foster youth transitioning to adulthood as well as increased social costs associated with failed transitions. Providing more reliable support for foster youth, such as providing success coaches, would tackle the root causes underlying these statistics.

## The Problem

Foster youth face significant developmental issues when they are neglected and not fully supported. Furthermore, studies have found that emotional and cognitive disruptions in the early lives of children have the potential to impair brain development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). The social impact is that society is failing foster youth. Although the overall number of children in foster care was lower in 2015 (427,910) than in 2006 (510,000), recent numbers suggest that the numbers may be increasing. For example, FY 2015 saw an increase in the number of children in foster care, as compared to FY 2014 (415,129) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).

We as a society know it is wrong to leave a foster child destitute. Conservative estimates of the costs to society for foster care children who fail to find success after aging out of foster care is



approximately \$8 billion annually (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013). We strive every day for a better tomorrow. We can't Make America Great Again if the most vulnerable population, i.e., foster children, are left behind.

The problem is that few youth who age out the foster care system are successful. There are so many promising CEO's, engineers, counselors, firefighter, doctors, and the next generations of change-agents that have yet to be substantially birthed.

Additionally, a success coach would benefit foster youth's professional ambitions a great deal. While other peers use parents to look over cover letters and applications, former foster youth often have no supportive adults focused on their success, which is why they would benefit greatly from access to someone committed to their success. Many foster youth will benefit from a professional support system in place. One would feel good to know that soon they will get meditative support by the pressing of a button on an app.

Every child in care dreams of a having a foster parent who is there for them and a caseworker who can attend to the needs of the child. Sadly, many times this is not the case. Every child has the

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prerogative at a chance at success. The playing field is not always leveled and children in foster care are not getting the outcomes they deserve. For instance, when foster youth age out, the experience is overwhelming to understand. Second, due to attrition rates of social workers, the proper resources are not allocated while in care such as career, education, and personal development resources. A success coach would help ensure youth receive access to those resources.

In March 2015, Harvard's Center on the Developing Child released a study saying every child who winds up doing well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult (Walsh, 2015). That said, if foster youth have quality foster parenting, consistent caseworkers, and a success coach in a supportive role, what a difference it would make. An effective model has been used with professionals in the program Wendy's Wonderful Kids. Wendy's Wonderful Kids aids foster youth who were left behind and provides a supportive role model through a local professional. These professionals, known as Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters, work on caseloads of children the system has forgotten, ensuring they have the time and resources to give each child as much attention as he or she deserves. These recruiters employ aggressive practices and proven tactics focused on finding the best home for a child through the starting points of familiar circles of family, friends and neighbors, and then reaching out to the communities in which they live (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2013).

However, innovative programs like Wendy's Wonderful Kids, did not use a success coach model with the most powerful tool to which millennials and Gen Zers connect--communication through a digital platform. With the proposed success coach model, we are not reinventing the wheel but rather employing a model that has proven to work. This additional support model utilizes the power of technology to connect with foster youth through a common medium: an app.

### **Current Law**

Under President Obama, the federal government recognized the increasing need for innovative programs to assist foster youth's transition into adulthood (White House, 2016). In May 2016, the White House hosted a Hackathon, bringing together child welfare leaders, non-profit organizations, philanthropies, attorneys and foster care families and alumni, as well as engineers, technologists and other leaders from the technology sector to improve the foster care system through improved technology. As an outgrowth of the Hackathon, for the first time in 23 years, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued new regulations that guide the use of technology in child welfare. These new regulations promote innovation and allow state and county child welfare agencies to use more effective technology to quickly identify youth and family needs and link them to services (White House, 2016).

Similarly, private technology groups and the not for profit sector have taken an increased interest in creating virtual platforms to aid in foster care youth transition into adulthood. For example, following the Hackathon, the Pritzker Foster Care Initiative announced the launch of a \$1 million Foster Care Technology Innovation Fund to boost non-profit entrepreneurial efforts targeted to supporting transition age youth 18-24 years of age in the foster care system. This fund provides opportunity to make a difference in the life of a foster youth transitioning out through technology. Similarly, Think of US, a non-profit in Richmond, is currently working on an app that helps youth in foster care transition out of the foster care system successfully.

Under existing law, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee) is the main federal program aimed at helping foster youth transition successfully. As of 2017, the funding level for 2017 is \$144 million for Chafee. The Chafee Program, despite supporting some innovative program models, has not implemented or regulated success coaches through a virtual platform for foster youth transitioning out of care. Thus, the pilot program for success coaches could be housed under the existing Chafee program. The virtual success pilot program I am recommending will and can be an intricate part of helping youth transition successfully.



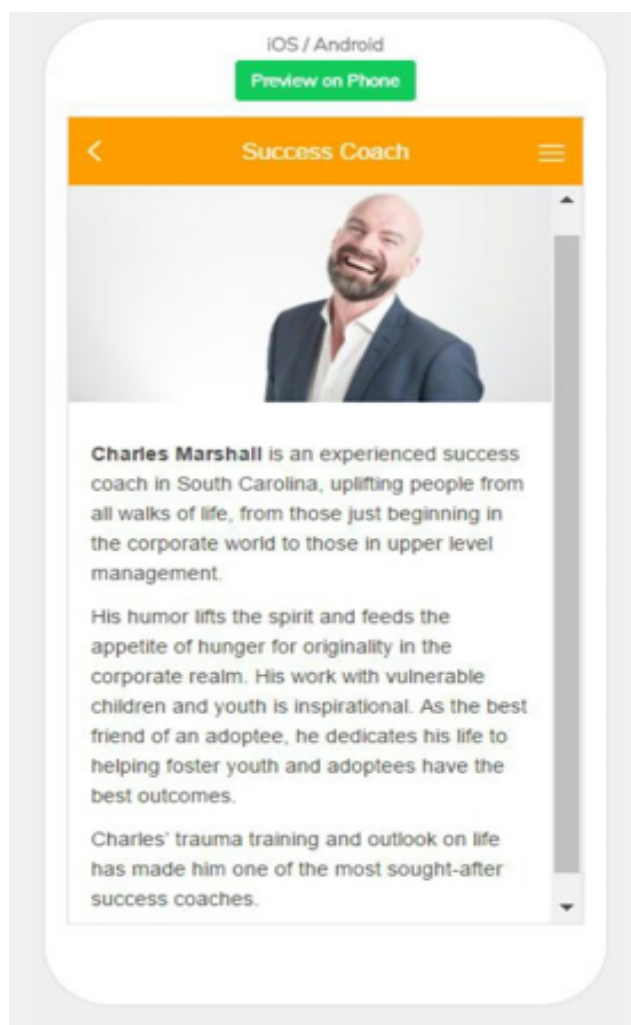
## Policy Recommendations

It is time to try different approaches to recurring problems. Like the great Einstein said, “Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is insanity.” This proposed pilot program will encourage public-private partners to boost tech investment in child welfare.” I recommend that the federal government fund a virtual pilot program for success coaches that helps youth transition successfully. The government has determined that the appropriate age to begin planning for transition starts at age 14. The success coach model should be tested as a pilot program in six states, targeting foster youth between 14 and 18 years of age. To increase participation in the program, Congress should offer an incentive, such as allowing success coaches to participate in the public services loan forgiveness program or offer coaches loan forgiveness.

The creation of the virtual app will encourage private individuals and businesses to partner with the government in creating a useable virtual platform in which eligible success coaches and foster youth in the pilot program can communicate, learn coping mechanisms like meditation, and share videos and documents that will train foster youth for a successful transition to adulthood. Unlike generations of the past, Millennials and Generation Z operate and communicate differently. They seek instant gratification, often using instant methods of communication through various social platforms. Thus to reach them, we must use communication mediums with which they are most familiar. Furthermore, millennials are sometimes unmotivated to visit an office or commute to a therapy session. Thus, using a digital platform for success coaching provides a comfortable environment for communication and will likely increase the success of any mentor-based model.

Congress should offer an incentive to increase participation for the best qualified success coaches, such as allowing success coaches to participate in the public services loan forgiveness program. Congress must communicate that this is a commitment through recruitment and that the well-being of foster children is its priority.

- Congress should fund a competitive pilot program that assigns virtual success coaches to millennials/generation Z between ages 14 and 18 using a virtual platform.
- Congress should extend federal loan forgiveness to eligible success coaches to encourage the participation of highly qualified individuals.



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# Increasing Social Emotional Support for Foster Youth on College Campuses by adding Single Point of Contact Models and Mentors

*Alexandria Ware*

## Executive Summary

“While 80 percent of foster youth desire to attend college (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014), less than 10 percent actually do attend college, and only 3 percent will earn a degree during their entire lifetime” (Promises2Kids, 2013). For the former foster youth that do get to college, many do not like to share their history and then cannot be identified for extra supports. For those who do share their connection to child welfare, access to supports can still be limited or hard to find at colleges and universities. One strategy to increase the college retention and graduation rates among foster care alumni is to connect them with mentors during college to help compensate for their lack of social and emotional support (Mendes, 2006; Day et al, 2011).

## Policy Recommendations Summary

- Congress should require every higher education institution that receives federal financial aid to establish a “Single Point of Contact” (SPOC) model for students who were previously in foster care.
- Congress should require that, when a university receives a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form with “yes” for Section 2, Question 52 that the university contact the matriculating student to ask if he or she may be identified as foster youth for additional supports, like mentors.

## Personal Reflection

During my first year of college in Kansas, I was extremely homesick and wanted to move to Oklahoma to be closer to family. I coped with homesickness by being very school-oriented: books, work, repeat. During sophomore year, I lost three biological relatives. I did not know who to talk to, and the trauma worsened my depression. Balancing my biological and adopted family life with the trauma and the pressures of college was difficult. I resorted to unhealthy coping mechanisms to numb the pain. Many individuals reached out to me to help during this troublesome time, but it was actually a mentor I met during a first-generation college adjustment program who took me to lunch to talk about my health. Because of her support, I know firsthand how impactful a mentor can be. My mentor supported me and taught me a healthy way to cope with trauma and grief. She made such a difference in my educational experience that I believe all foster youth in higher education should have access to mentors for emotional and social support.

## The Problem

The transition from foster care to real life, including higher education, is a difficult adjustment for most foster youth, because they often do not have the resources or skills to adapt to and persevere in new situations. For many young adults, the challenge is not the process of getting into college, but staying and obtaining the degree (National Center for Public Policy and Education, 2010; Griffith, 2008; Alon & Tienda, 2005; Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013).

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Research shows that lacking healthy social and emotional support systems strongly correlates to dropping out of college (Day et al., 2011; Day & Pennefather, 2014). One reason students who were previously in foster care have higher odds of dropping out of college is that they arrive on campus without strong connections to caring adults whom they can turn to for support in dealing with the stresses of college-level coursework (Mitchell & Trickett, 1980; National Center for Mental Health Promotion & Youth Violence Prevention, 2010; Day et al., 2011). Foster care did not prepare them for the pressures of college life.

“Thus, one way to increase the college retention and graduation rates among foster care alumni would be to provide them with mentors or other formal sources of social support to compensate for their lack of access to informal networks” (Mendes, 2006; Day et al, 2011).

### **Current Law**

Federal law does not currently connect foster youth students with the mentors and support they need. Draft legislation does exist, including The Foster Youth Mentoring Act of 2017 (H.R. 2952, 2017), introduced by U.S. Representative Karen Bass. If enacted, it would address the need for greater support of foster care youth, who lack the social capital, resources, and support they need to develop positive relationships and connections (The Foster Youth Mentoring Act of 2017, 2017). However, it has not been enacted and even if it is, it only serves foster children up to age 18.

In 2015, Senator Patty Murray reintroduced The Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act of 2015 (S. 2267, 2017), which she also introduced in 2013. This bill, if enacted, would require higher education institutions to supply a designated Single Point of Contact (SPOC) model as a resource for homeless and foster youth (Lee, Stidum, & Fan-Chan, 2016). “The SPOC model supplies an “on campus” coordinator who helps homeless and foster care youth successfully navigate the college process, including admissions, financial aid, and student life (Dworsky et al., 2010; Lee, Stidum, & Fan-Chan, 2016).” The SPOC model’s initial point of contact person is a coordinator, who then helps the student navigate the wrap around services available, including mentorship, financial, academic and housing resources.

### **Private Sector Models**

Currently, universities in 16 states use some form of the SPOC model (Fostering Success Michigan, 2017). However, “most of these programs are run by individuals and private organizations, and are not statewide initiatives. The existing private efforts within states, such as those in Michigan, Washington, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, California, and Arizona, have actively engaged broad groups of stakeholders and young people in comprehensive planning and cross-system collaboration to address the disparities that exist between foster youth and their non-system peers” (Jones, 2013; Gonzalves, 2013). Generally, these are SPOC style and include the coordinator and peer mentors.

Michigan has a statewide education initiative, Fostering Success Michigan, which begins in 6th grade and continues until college. When youth reach college, they can opt into one of 14 programs. One of the programs, Transition to Independence Program (TIP) at Wayne State University, was founded by Dr. Angelique Day in the fall of 2012, and is now the second largest of such programs in the country. The program is comprehensive, ensures that coordinators have a light load and uses peer mentors to reach out to younger students. One unique aspect of TIP is its student run organization, that gives students a sense of belonging at the school (A. Day, personal communication, June 21, 2017).

In 2007, Washington created a statewide program, Passport to College Promise: College Assistance and Support for Former Foster Youth, that allows universities to create unique programs to fit the needs of their campus and community. Generally, this model includes the coordinator and peer mentors. Many universities in Washington use different types of mentors, mainly a peer mentor, typically called a

One thing that stands out from the rest of the programs is that the schools have to submit a viable plan to WSAC, stating how they plan to identify, what resources are available for the youth and then they will receive reimbursement from the government (S. Falcon, personal communication, June 26, 2017). Based on all the research that was conducted during this process, while SPOC models vary, I believe that there are key characteristics that need to be part of each program, including the coordinator, peer mentors, and wrap around services. The Michigan and Washington State examples above model these key characteristics and every university that receives federal financial aid should offer these programs.

## A 3D map of the United States showing state boundaries. States are colored in three categories: blue (e.g., Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota), grey (e.g., Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota), and light blue (e.g., Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota).

## Policy Recommendations

- The federal and state government should support the implementation of college mentor programs for current or former court wards, which include adopted, foster care and guardianship youth (Day & Pennefather, 2014). “Such campus support programs would offer wrap around services for adopted, guardianship and youth aging out of foster care that would include not only help with accessing

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financial, academic and housing resources to stay in school, but the necessary psychological services that may be needed to assist youth with trauma histories” (Day & Pennefather, 2014).

- Congress should require that, when a university receives a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form with “yes” for Section 2, Question 52 that the university contact the matriculating student to ask if he or she may be identified as foster youth for additional supports, like mentors.

There are a few ways that youth can be contacted based off the resources the state provides. Since the universities already receive the FAFSA application data to process the student’s financial aid packages, they can use this identifying information to pass it on to the coordinator of the SPOC model. Then, the coordinator can reach out to the students to find out if they want to be identified as a foster youth or not and make them aware of the available resources on campus. Ideally these resources would be most successful if offered through a newly design application.



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# Foster Care Bill of Rights

*Jameelah A. Love*

## Executive Summary

When youth enter into the foster care system they step into a world that is different from any environment they have known. However, foster care is a safety net and therefore out-of-home care should not be inferior to the lives the youths had before entering care. In 2014, Congress required states to ensure that youth in foster care receive a list of their rights (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, 2014). But, young people still report that they are not aware of their rights, which suggests that there is room to improve current policy. Foster youth should have rights and know their rights, which should include the right to receive proper mental health care that is trauma-informed, age-appropriate and sensitive to their life experiences, and to be able to know and communicate with their siblings. Congress should strengthen current law by creating a federal bill of rights to ensure uniformity of rights for all youth in care. Empowering youth with rights can help to create more positive outcomes within the foster care system.

## Policy Recommendations Summary

For many years Congress has been enacting bipartisan proposals to promote better outcomes for young people in foster care. Congress can strengthen current policy intended to empower youth with rights by building on the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, 2014). My recommendations to Congress include:

- Congress should direct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to develop a federal foster care bill of rights for youth in foster care. To develop the foster care bill of rights, HHS should convene a workgroup comprised of foster youth, foster and birth parents, caseworkers and other agency staff, judicial officials, children's advocates.
- Amend the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act by requiring that youth receive a list of rights starting at age 12 so that they are aware of their rights and to receive an annual updated document (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, 2014).
- Enforce the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act pertaining to foster youth being given a list of these federal rights and that stakeholders (judges, attorneys, caseworkers, medical professionals, foster parents etc.) are given training on what rights are afforded to foster youth (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, 2014).

## Personal Reflection

I entered foster care at age 14 and was immediately separated from my siblings. During my time in foster care, I was never told of my rights as a youth in foster care, including any rights to be connected to my siblings. No information was given to me about my right to have my personal documents, attend court hearings, receive an allowance, or to visit my siblings. Without knowing my rights, I wasn't able to advocate for myself the way I could if I had known about my rights. Looking back, I know that having rights would have made a big difference in my ability to advocate for myself and for others to advocate for me. Knowing my rights would have increased my likelihood to reach a higher level of independency before I aged out of the foster care.

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## The Problem

When youth are moved from their homes and enter the foster care system the government becomes their guardians. As their guardians, the government should ensure these youth are receiving appropriate care and being given the needed tools to live safe and stable lives. Unfortunately, foster youth outcomes are typically well below the national average in outcomes and in knowing what resources and rights are afforded to them. Studies by leading research organizations highlight the high risk of incarceration, school drop-out, and homelessness for youth who age out of foster care. There are staggering statistics surrounding foster care such as 15 percent of foster youth pursuing post-secondary education and 3 percent obtaining a college degree.

For years, youth have played a key role in advocating for their rights. In fact, the first foster youth bill of rights was ratified in Philadelphia in 1973 (Dougherty, 2005). In addition to concerns expressed by youth, other professionals are concerned that youth voices are not being correctly engaged and implemented into their case plans and court proceedings. The underrepresentation of youth voice can lead to insupportable services being provided to youth and youth growing without the ability to advocate for themselves.

## Current Law

In 2014 the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (H.R. 4980) was passed and it requires state child welfare agencies to ensure “the case plan for all children ages 14 and older must also include a list of rights that describes their rights with respect to education, health, visitation, court participation, staying safe, and avoiding exploitation” (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, 2014). This law however does not state what rights should be included in the document. In addition 18 states and Puerto Rico have enacted their own Foster Care Bill of Rights, but vary in what rights are covered (Foster Care Bill of Rights, 2016).

The state of Arizona passed a Foster Care Bill of Rights in 2009 that not only list foster youth’s basic rights but also stated that youth shall receive contact information for the child’s caseworker, attorney or advocate and to speak with them in private if necessary and also that they can report a violation of personal rights specified in this section without fear of punishment, interference, coercion or retaliation.

In 2016, Florida’s legislature specified its intended goals rather than rights for youth in out of home care which included “regular visitation at least once a week with their siblings” and “to raise grievances with the department over the care they are receiving from their caregivers, caseworkers, or other service providers”.

Various organizations have published sample Foster Care Bill of Rights. For example, the National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD) made a comprehensive compilation of different foster

## This is Our TRUTH

- 1 in 5 foster youth will become homeless
- ½ will be unemployed at age 24
- Less than 3% will earn a college degree
- 2/3 of will become pregnant by age 21
- 1 in 4 will experience PTSD



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care bill of rights using models from states, agencies and youth boards across the country (NRCYD, 2014). The NRCYD intended that their document to be “utilized by a State that is currently developing a Bill of Rights for the youth in foster care, or by States that are in the process of updating an existing Bill of Rights document” (NRCYD, 2014).

There is not a federal foster care bill of rights but foster youth are a high risk population that needs to be afforded basic rights such as safety, dignity, quality of life and opportunities. However, with the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (H.R. 4980) Congress took an extraordinary step in protecting foster youth by legislating that all foster youth are entitled to a document with a list of their rights (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, 2014). Congress can build on this progress by ensuring that all foster youth have a universal minimum standard of rights.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- **Congress should direct the Department of Health and Human Services to develop a federal foster care bill of rights for youth in foster care. To develop the foster care bill of rights, HHS should convene a workgroup comprised of foster youth, foster and birth parents, caseworkers and other agency staff, judicial officials, children’s advocates and others as approved.**

This work group should study examples of foster care bills of rights that have been passed by state policy makers and other examples recommended by youth and experts. The work group shall produce the foster care bill of rights within 1 year from enactment.

- **Amend the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act so that youth receive a new federal bill of rights starting at age 12 and receive an annual updated document that shall be signed by the youth (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, 2014).**

Many courts allow youth to participate in their court proceedings at age 12 because youth can comprehend better and advocate for their own needs if they know what rights are afforded to them. Youth shall receive this document annually so new additions can be stated and youth can be reminded of their rights.

- **Enforce the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act pertaining to the requirement of foster youth being given a list of their rights and that stakeholders (judges, attorneys, caseworkers, medical professionals, foster parents etc.) are given training on what rights are afforded to foster youth.**

Someone at the agency such as an ombudsman should be appointed as a contact to ensure workers are complying to these requirements and said person’s contact information shall be listed in the Foster Care Bill of Rights and given to youth.

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## MEET THE INTERNS

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### Justin Abbasi

**Foster Care:** South Carolina

**Years in Care:** 7

**Status:** Emancipated

**Currently Resides:** Connecticut

**Age:** 21

**Education:** Yale University

**Major:** Ecology & Evolutionary Biology

**Congressional Office:** Minority Finance Committee - Chair U.S. Senator Ron Wyden



### Alexis Arambul

**Foster Care:** Washington

**Years in Care:** 3

**Status:** Independent

**Currently Resides:** Washington

**Age:** 22

**Education:** Washington State University-Pullman

**Major:** Political Science

**Congressional Office:** Minority HELP Committee - Ranking Senator Patty Murray



### Tiffany Boyd

**Foster Care:** California

**Years in Care:** 9+

**Status:** Emancipated

**Currently Resides:** California

**Age:** 29

**Education:** California State University-Dominguez Hills

**Major:** Public Administration

**Congressional Office:** Senator Kamala Harris

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## MEET THE INTERNS

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### Eden Harris

**Foster Care:** District of Columbia

**Years in Care:** 7

**Status:** Aged out

**Currently Resides:** District of Columbia

**Age:** 26

**Education:** North Carolina Wesleyan College

**Major:** Business Administration: Entrepreneurship

**Congressional Office:** U.S. Senator Richard Burr



### Tonisha Hora

**Foster Care:** Wisconsin

**Years in Care:** 4+, was in kinship care in the years prior

**Status:** Aged out

**Age:** 22

**Education:** University of Wisconsin-Stout

**Major:** Human Development and Family Studies with an emphasis on Social Work

**Congressional Office:** U.S. Senator Ron Johnson



### Keola Limkin

**Foster Care:** Hawaii

**Years in Care:** 3

**Status:** Emancipated

**Currently Resides:** Hawaii

**Age:** 26

**Education:** University of Hawaii

**Major:** Psychology and Communication

**Congressional Office:** U.S. Senator Mazie Hirono



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## MEET THE INTERNS

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### Jameelah A. Love

**Foster Care:** Wisconsin

**Years in Care:** 4

**Status:** Aged out

**Age:** 26

**Education:** University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

**Major:** Political Science

**Congressional Office:** Minority House Ways and Means- Ranking Representative Richard Neal



### Michael Teresa Mellifera

**Foster Care:** Ohio

**Years in Care:** Approximately 10

**Status:** Emancipated

**Age:** 21

**Education:** The Catholic University of America

**Major:** Philosophy with a double minor in Theology and Islamic World Studies

**Congressional Office:** Majority Finance Committee- Chair U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch



### Htet Htet Rodgers

**Foster Care:** Louisiana

**Years in Care:** 6

**Status:** Aged Out

**Currently Resides:** Louisiana

**Age:** 21

**Education:** Northern State University of Louisiana-Natchitoches

**Major:** Psychology

**Congressional Office:** U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy

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## MEET THE INTERNS

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### Jameshia Shepherd

**Foster Care:** Michigan

**Years in Care:** 5

**Status:** Aged out

**Currently Resides:** Michigan

**Age:** 24

**Education:** Michigan State University

**Major:** Social Work

**Congressional Office:** U.S. Representative Brenda Lawrence



### Demontea Thompson

**Foster Care:** California

**Years in Care:** 18

**Status:** Emancipated

**Currently Resides:** California

**Age:** 25

**Education:** University of Southern California

**Major:** Postsecondary Administration and Student Affairs

**Congressional Office:** U.S. Senator Tim Scott



### Alexandria Ware

**Hometown:** Kansas

**Years in Care:** 11

**Status:** Emancipated

**Currently Resides:** Oklahoma

**Age:** 24

**Education:** Oklahoma State University-Tulsa

**Major:** Human Development and Family Sciences with an Emphasis on Infant Mental Health

**Congressional Office:** Majority House Ways and Means- Chair Representative Kevin Brady

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*Justin, Alexis, Keola, Tiffany, Eden, Michael, Htet Htet,  
Jameshia, Demontea, Alex, Tonisha and Jameelah*

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