

REFORMING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN PERMANENCY PLANNING FOR FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE

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RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To improve outcomes for older youth who have experienced foster care, Congress should 1) incentivize collaboration among child welfare agencies, workforce development boards, and local organizations, 2) require youth voice in permanency planning early, and 3) extend eligibility for services to age 25 for youth who have aged out of foster care.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our current child welfare system lacks the structural and emotional support needed to serve youth aging out of the child welfare system. With strong federal leadership, we can reform the system collectively through expanded workforce development, proper education on youth rights, meaningful youth engagement, extended services, and greater professional accountability. Investing in this population isn't just smart policy — it's a moral imperative to young adults everywhere that can transform individual lives and strengthen future generations.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

As a foster youth, I was exploited and silenced by professionals within the child welfare system. I met my court-appointed guardian ad litem for the first time on the day my case was closed, even though my case had been open for nearly two years. Despite tearfully expressing that I did not want to return home due to significant and ongoing issues in my biological family, I was reunified with my mother. At no point was I informed of my rights or empowered to advocate for myself. Less than two years later, Child Protective Services abruptly removed me and my five siblings once again. We were placed more than an hour away with my brother's former foster parent. This "safety plan" was never documented. My parents were not informed of their rights or next steps. We were marked absent from school, and no one in the system offered resources or answers. As a result, my academic performance declined drastically, and I lost temporary custody of my own child.

PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

Thankfully, I was part of a college preparatory program at the time with the Park West Foundation of Michigan. When I suddenly stopped attending, the program director began advocating for me and my siblings to be located. They eventually uncovered the so-called “safety plan” and realized that, instead of protecting us, it had created more trauma, instability, and legal confusion, particularly when my mother removed me from the placement without knowing whether it was legally permitted, since the plan had never been properly documented. My experience is not unique. Many transition-aged youth across the country face similar, or even worse, circumstances. These injustices fuel my passion to transform the child welfare system into one where young people are truly seen, heard, and supported — not just to survive, but to thrive.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Older youth aging out of foster care face instability at an alarming rate compared to the general population. Once youth who have experienced the child welfare system reach the age of 18 – or 21, in states with extended foster care – many lose access to essential services, relationships, and structured support. Even before the age 18, many are not provided with the resources they are eligible for, such as scholarships, grants, post case services, knowledge of their rights, and housing assistance. Without proper planning, education, and inclusion in decision-making, these young people oftentimes struggle with housing, healthcare, employment, education, transportation, and mental health, leaving them unprepared for independent adulthood.

Despite federal efforts to support older youth in foster care such as Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee Program), significant gaps persist. These laws do not consistently require youth involvement in permanency planning, adequately support career development, or incentivize long-term permanency. As a result, poor outcomes persist. Over 36% of youth who age out of care experience homelessness within four years. Nearly 20% of the prison population is made up of former foster youth. The unemployment rate among foster care alumni hovers around 47%; and nearly 70% are arrested by age 26 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022; Carson, 2018; Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2009). Education disparities are equally staggering; dropout rates are three times higher than average and fewer than 10% earn a degree (NFYI, 2025).



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THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Programs like the Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM) provide examples for future federal reform. CYPM focuses on supporting youth and their families by identifying additional resources and promoting stability. Research has shown that CYPM leads to reductions in youth recidivism, pre-adjudication detention, sustained juvenile justice petitions, and the use of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA). It also improves behavioral health outcomes, access to resources, home placement, reunification, educational success, and engagement in pro-social activities (CEBC, 2018). To date, CYPM has been implemented in over 120 counties across 23 states (Center for Youth Justice, 2025).



Youth advocates and professionals with lived experience emphasize the need to extend foster care services beyond age 21. Services must be youth-driven, developmentally appropriate, and responsive to the unique needs of older youth (Journey to Success, 2024). Addressing these needs with intentional, sustained support is essential for improving long-term outcomes and breaking cycles of instability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve outcomes for older youth who have experienced foster care, Congress should:

- **Incentivize Cross-System Collaboration:** Congress should incentivize collaboration among child welfare agencies, workforce development boards, and local organizations. This collaboration should be supported by a national shared resource database and federally funded implementation benchmarks. A model similar to the Crossover Youth Practice Model can serve as a national standard, given its demonstrated impact and implementation in 23 states and over 125 communities across the country.
- **Require Youth Voice in Permanency Planning Early:** Beginning at age 13, youth should be involved in crafting their transition plans. Currently, transition planning typically begins at age 16. Starting earlier, specifically during early high school, would allow youth more time to prepare for adulthood. These plans should include housing, education, employment goals, and mentorship. Additionally, federal investment is needed to fund paid opportunities for youth with lived experience to serve as professionals and leaders in the field.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

- **Extend Care and Support Services Until Age 25:** Extend eligibility for services to age 25 for youth who have aged out of foster care. These services should focus on housing stability, educational access, employment readiness, mental health, and disability supports. The SOUL Family Framework emphasizes permanent, supportive relationships and community connections that create a family-like environment for older youth even after they exit formal foster care. By adopting this framework, states can move beyond traditional systems and implement more flexible, youth-centered approaches that prioritize stability, belonging, security, and lifelong connection.