



Hot Topic: Supporting Older Youth Exiting Foster Care to Independence

ACTION:

- Extend foster care through age 21 nationally
- Increase funding for the Chafee Program, fully fund Education and Training Vouchers, and reduce barriers to participation
- Provide greater and simpler access to student loans and on-campus services, including access to campus housing year-round
- Provide greater targeted housing assistance and better coordination of housing resources such as the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers and Chafee funding
- Pass the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act to support LGBTQIA+ youth and caregivers

Background

More than 15,000 young people transitioned from foster care to independence without the benefit of formal reunification or an alternative permanency outcome in 2024. Nationally, child welfare agencies find families for fewer than half of teenagers and young adults in foster care. Young people transitioning out of foster care are affected significantly by the instability that accompanies long periods of out-of-home placement during childhood and adolescence. They often find themselves truly on their own, with few if any financial resources, no place to live, and little or no support from family, friends, or community. Their experiences place them at higher risk for unemployment, poor educational outcomes, health issues, early parenthood, long-term dependency on public assistance, increased rates of incarceration, and homelessness.

Older youth face unique challenges while in foster care, such as difficulty obtaining drivers' licenses and other vital documents, navigating benefits and assistance related to employment, education, and other supports, and establishing safe and stable housing. Although some states extend foster care beyond age 18 and the John H. Chafee Independent Living Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood offers limited funding for transitional services to these young people to age 26, enrollment in extended foster care and Chafee services is lower than it should be. All too often young people in foster care find themselves on their own at 18.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

Extending foster care services beyond age 18 continues to be the best way to support older youth transitioning from foster care to independence. Society has changed since Congress first directed federal foster care to end at age 18 in 1980—with rising costs of living and higher education, and fewer work opportunities available, many young adults choose to live at home and rely on the support of their families well past high school as they seek education, employment, and stable housing; we must ensure that young people in foster care have access to similar supports as they transition to adulthood and independence.

Since the passage of the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*, states have had the option to claim Title IV-E funding for extended foster care up to age 21; to date, 29 states, the District of Columbia, and nine Tribes have extended Title IV-E foster care for youth beyond age 18. Compared to youth that exit foster care at age 18, youth who remain in care have better outcomes: higher rates of employment, housing, school attendance and graduation, and health coverage. They also have lower rates of incarceration, drug treatment referrals, and giving birth or fathering a child. **Congress should:**

- Pass the bipartisan *Increasing Access to Foster Care Through 21 Act* to incentivize states to extend foster care through age 21

HIGHER EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Education and vocational training beyond high school is increasingly necessary for economic stability and success, yet youth with foster care experience face enormous barriers to accessing and completing postsecondary education. Research indicates that 84% of youth in foster care ages 17 to 18 want to go to college, but only 20% follow through on their ambitions. The postsecondary degree completion rate for young adults from foster care ranges from 8% to 12% by their mid- to late-twenties. In comparison, approximately 49% of all young adults have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Young adults exiting foster care face financial challenges including housing insecurity during breaks, lack of family support, difficulty navigating financial aid and application processes, and the need to work to support themselves while attending school.

The Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program provides up to \$5,000 annually for eligible foster youth attending

postsecondary education or training programs, but this amount has not increased since the program's creation in 2002 and falls far short of covering the true costs of higher education, which have increased exponentially over the same period of time. Additionally, many campuses lack the wraparound supports that most foster youth need to succeed, including year-round housing, mental health services, peer support, and dedicated advising.

To ensure access to higher education for youth in and from foster care, **Congress must:**

- Increase the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) maximum award from \$5,000 to \$12,000 annually to reflect current higher education costs
- Expand ETV eligibility to include youth in kinship care and those who achieved permanency through guardianship after age 16
- Provide greater and simpler access to student loans and on-campus services, including access to campus housing year-round
- Pass the *Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act*

HOUSING

Housing stability is the key to reducing intergenerational poverty and increasing economic mobility, but in recent years, skyrocketing housing costs and a lack of investment in new affordable housing have resulted in families and young adults struggling to maintain stable housing. Recent data indicates 80% of Americans in rural communities and 72% of Americans in urban communities believe housing affordability is getting worse in their communities.

Youth and young adults who have experienced foster care face increased risk of housing instability upon transitioning to independence. Young adults exiting foster care consistently report that housing is a primary concern. In 2024 24% of young people age 17 that were surveyed reported experiencing homelessness in the past two years; 19% of young people age 19 and 16% of young people age 21 reported the same. Lack of safe and stable housing can lead to other serious concerns, such as worsening mental and physical health, increased substance use, increased vulnerability to trafficking and violence, and lower education and employment attainment.

To address housing instability for children, families, and young adults **Congress should:**

- Expand funding for and increase time limits of Family Unification Program vouchers, including Foster Youth to Independence vouchers
- Incentivize the creation of housing-child welfare partnerships to coordinate existing resources and streamline service navigation for young adults from child welfare

- Expand access to supportive housing services for young adults exiting foster care through Chafee reform and other measures

FOOD AND NUTRITION

In 2023, Congress added new exceptions to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's (SNAP) work requirements for individuals experiencing homelessness, young adults who are leaving foster care and veterans, allowing them to more easily access food assistance. These exemptions were eliminated in H.R. 1.

SNAP can be a vital lifeline and support for young people as they transition to adulthood, especially for young people leaving foster care or experiencing homelessness, providing a level of stability that allows these young adults to thrive. The elimination of this exemption creates additional hardship for young people who already have limited supports and resources—work requirements create obstacles that can be particularly difficult to overcome due to their lack of family and social support. These requirements can hinder their ability to navigate life as independent adults and find stability through housing and employment. **Congress must:**

- Pass the *SNAP Back Act* or similar legislation to reinstate these exemptions

LGBTQIA+ Youth

LGBTQIA+ children are over-represented in child welfare; one recent confidential survey revealed that 32 percent of foster children ages 12-21 surveyed report that they identify as having a diverse sexual orientation or gender identity. Research suggests that many LGBTQIA+ youth face higher rates of physical abuse, and are more likely to run away from home or be kicked out, often because of conflict over their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQIA+ youth are faced with adversity and discrimination, and such adversity takes a toll: LGBTQIA+ youth have higher rates of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts than their peers. Better services and care for LGBTQIA+ children and their families are needed to protect youth and to preserve their families and their lives. Recently, the Administration has rolled back regulatory protections for LGBTQIA+ youth and families, including efforts to limit access to necessary services and rescind the Designated Placements rule. **Congress should:**

- Pass the *John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act* to support LGBTQIA+ families and children in foster care
- Codify the key provisions of the Designated Placements rule requiring state agencies to provide safe, appropriately trained caregivers for LGBTQIA+ youth
- Fund research for Family Acceptance that provide parents of LGBTQIA+ with needed supports, so effective programs may be included in the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse

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