

# Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan

All young people face challenges as they prepare for the transition to adulthood, but youth who exit foster care due to age restrictions rather than a permanent placement face additional challenges as they prepare to leave care and begin their adult lives. To support youth in making a successful transition and achieving positive outcomes, child welfare professionals can partner with youth to develop their personalized transition plan. It is important to view transition planning as a process that unfolds over time and through authentic youth engagement rather than as a checklist of items to accomplish.

This bulletin is intended to help child welfare professionals and others partner with youth to develop a transition plan that meets Federal requirements, builds on their strengths, and supports their needs. To provide insight into the thoughts and experiences of youth, Child Welfare Information Gateway conducted a series of interviews with youth who have transitioned out of foster care. Interviewees' names have been changed to protect their identities.

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## THE TRANSITION-PLANNING PROCESS

A successful transition from childhood to adulthood can be difficult even under the best circumstances. Youth need the support of family, connections to resources in their community, and opportunities to grow into successful adults. When youth age out of the foster care system on their own, they need help accessing resources related to housing, education or vocational planning, health care, and financial literacy and money management. They also need assistance in developing and maintaining the relationships and connections necessary to be successful.

Transition planning [should begin at age 14](#)—at the latest—and must be finalized no later than 90 days prior to the youth turning age 18. Best practice for transition planning involves viewing planning as a process that considers the youth's long-term plans and breaks them down into smaller, short-term goals. Planning should incorporate a youth's wishes, hopes, and dreams. However, caseworkers may need to work with youth to make sure goals are attainable. A transition plan should also be flexible and include multiple options, not just a single choice. Plans should anticipate that circumstances may change and provide backup pathways for housing, education, employment, and other goals.

Even though some States offer youth in out-of-home care the option to extend their placement up to age 21 and continue receiving services after they reach age 18,

many youth exit care at 18 or younger (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022; Fryar et al., 2017). Early planning may help youth see the benefits of staying in care past age 18 and make an informed decision about incorporating that into their transition plan. For additional information read [Extension of Foster Care Beyond Age 18](#).

## WHAT SHOULD TRANSITION PLANS INCLUDE?

Transition planning helps youth acquire the skills and competencies they need to prepare them for adulthood. The [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) provides a general list of elements that must be included in transition plans, such as the youth's plans for housing, employment, mentoring, and education. How these specific components are covered or addressed can vary by State and even by agency. The [Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014](#) requires the case review system to ensure that all youth leaving foster care—because they reached age 18 or older (if the State elected to increase the age)—have a copy of the following items:<sup>1</sup>

- Birth certificate
- Social Security card
- Health insurance information<sup>2</sup>
- Medical records
- Driver's license or State-issued identification card

<sup>1</sup> The case review system is a procedure for ensuring that each child has a case plan designed to place them in the least restrictive and most appropriate setting, consistent with the best interests and special needs of the child, and that the status of each child is reviewed no less frequently than every 6 months by a court of administrative review to determine if the placement is still appropriate and the extent to which the case plan is being followed, among other things (Social Security Act §475[5]).

<sup>2</sup> Youth should be informed about creating a [health-care proxy](#) and understand how they will maintain access to health insurance after transitioning out of foster care.

## What's the Difference Between a Transition Plan and Independent Living Services?

A **transition plan** is required by the [Fostering Connections Act](#) for each youth exiting foster care. The [Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act](#) requires that transition planning for successful adulthood start at age 14 and include the youth in this planning. The [Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010](#) amended the transition plan provision to require that youth be educated about the importance of designating someone who can, when necessary, make healthcare decisions on their behalf.

**Independent living services** are provided by programs (as referred by caseworkers) to youth in or formerly in out-of-home care to help them prepare for self-sufficiency. Services often focus on financial skills, educational or vocational assistance, household management skills, and employment preparation. For more information on independent living services, visit Information Gateway's [Independent Living and Transitioning From Foster Care](#) web section.

FosterClub's [Transition Toolkit](#) provides youth with a step-by-step process for thinking about leaving care and includes transition plan templates. The guide is centered on 10 critical areas: finances, employment, life skills, identity, permanence, education, health, housing, transportation, and community.

The Federal requirements for transition plans focus on the logistics of exiting care—housing, health care, employment, etc.—while the emotional, psychological, and developmental aspects of the transition may be overlooked. Child welfare professionals who work with youth on transition planning can partner with youth to assess their strengths and needs and address any current or future challenges to prepare them for adulthood, foster self-determination, and build resiliency. Youth in foster care have likely experienced [adverse childhood experiences](#) such as trauma, loss, grief, or child maltreatment. These experiences can have negative effects on brain development, mental health, and well-being. While caseworkers should work with youth to identify mental health and medical providers that serve adults, it is also important to help youth understand the impacts their life experiences may have had on them and how they may affect the transition from foster care.

## Tips From Young Adults With Lived Experience

“I wish more caseworkers understood that we often struggle to believe long-term goals are even possible. You can’t always jump into goal setting when someone’s never been shown how to hope or hasn’t had their basic emotional needs consistently met. Before making a ‘plan,’ the system needs to start with building a relationship; someone who sees you, not just someone who fills out paperwork with you.”—Sam, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

“Let the youth have input and say when it comes to these plans. We also have to make sure that youth have the full picture and enough details that they can accurately prepare and plan for the future.”—Chris, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

“Developing trust goes a long way during this [transition] period. If the child can’t trust [their caseworker], they’re not going to open up, and in order for a successful transition, you need children to open up about their dreams, their ambitions, their goals, and what they want out of life.”—Alex, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

## ENGAGING YOUTH IN PLANNING

As experts on their own lives, youth should be recognized as equal and capable partners in transition planning and in decision-making. Child welfare professionals should meet them where they are, provide necessary information and support, and follow the youth's lead. Authentic youth engagement refers to an intentional, mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults where young people's ideas, perspectives, and strengths are understood and where their contributions are valued (Oliver & Russell, 2023). Trusted partnerships between child welfare professionals and youth are a way to engage young people in meaningful activities that contribute to positive youth development. It is essential to incorporate youth voice into the transition-planning process. Authentic youth engagement can also help young people build a sense of identity, leadership, and advocacy.

Child welfare professionals should [involve young people](#) in shaping transition plans, elevating their voices, and providing the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. According to the Texas Foster Youth Permanency Study, youth feel that the opportunity to have input on decisions about their own lives is an important aspect of supportive relationships with caseworkers and other professionals (Mamma, n.d.). Youth who shared their thoughts and ideas while partnering with professionals on permanency planning had a more positive view of the child welfare system and developed a stronger sense of themselves and their future. Many States have developed programs to meaningfully engage youth in transition planning.

## State Examples:

- EPIC 'Ohana, Inc., in **Honolulu, HI**, employs the [E Makua Ana Youth Circle program](#), a culturally appropriate program for working with youth to develop their transition plans. The program provides customized worksheets that list resources for housing, education, and finances as well as other pertinent information (e.g., application dates, requirements). Youth preparing to leave foster care identify members of their circle, who later come together to help plan for the youth's needs as they enter adulthood.
- In **Iowa**, [Department of Health & Human Services](#) case managers hold youth-centered meetings with youth and family members, child welfare professionals, service providers, and others identified by the youth to support them as they prepare for the transition to adulthood. The meetings begin at age 14 and take place periodically until the youth exits foster care. Transition-planning specialists are available to assist youth with their transition plan, and a life skills assessment is completed with the youth to help identify skills needed to aid in the transition out of foster care.

For additional information on best practices for engaging youth in planning, read [Prioritizing Youth Voice: The Importance of Authentic Youth Engagement in Case Planning](#), [Belonging Matters - Helping Youth Explore Permanency](#), and [Promoting Permanency for Older Youth in Out-of-Home Care](#).

## Tips From Young Adults With Lived Experience

"[Caseworkers] need to have meaningful engagements with young people. I know the job requires a certain amount of engagement, but don't just do it because the job says you have to. [Engaging youth in transition planning] is a great opportunity to give youth the tools they need to go out and be successful adults."—Chris, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

"I got lucky that [my caseworker] was able to work with me through my distrust of her early on. She was willing to take the time out of her busy schedule to go get ice cream with me and talk with me a little extra."—Alex, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

"Authenticity is important. When you're engaging with these kids, they can see through [you]. . . I could always tell when a social worker was just there to collect a check or just there to fill a gap. The ones that went the extra mile, those were the ones I would listen to and connect with. Those were the ones that earned my trust and my respect."—Sam, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

## SUPPORTING YOUTH IN MAINTAINING AND DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS

Helping youth maintain and develop connections should also be a part of the transition-planning process. Youth are best supported by informed caseworkers and others who understand that attachments, connections, and meaningful relationships are a source of stability for young people. It's important for caseworkers to help youth develop transition plans that connect them to supportive resources, services, and people. In addition, having caring adults in youths' lives work with them on transition-planning tasks can lay the foundation for relationships that will last into adulthood. States have incorporated this principle into practice by having youth include the important adults in their lives in their transition-planning meetings.

### State Examples:

- The **Indiana** Department of Child Services' [Older Youth Initiatives \(OYI\)](#) program offers independent living services to youth who are preparing to transition out of foster care. Through OYI's [Youth Connections Program](#), the State helps youth identify supportive adult connections. Program staff collaborate with the youth, their case manager, and other partners to locate an appropriate adult who can become an essential connection for the youth. Once a supportive adult is identified, the program staff member makes recommendations on how the youth and adult can build a strong relationship that can guide the young person into adulthood.

### Tips From Young Adults With Lived Experience

"[My caseworker] ensured that the relationship I had with my siblings didn't fall apart. She would organize transportation for us to have visitation, or she would pick me up and take me to my siblings. It's important to make sure that the child is able to visit the important people in their life. . .because these relationships are everything for these kids."—Alex, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

"[My mentors] were awesome. They are a really big component of why [my brother] and I are the way we are today. They put in the effort to make sure we were connected and spent quality time with each other. . .It is really important for children and youth to maintain that family connection, whether it's phone calls or Zoom calls or even visitation. Being able to go back to your natural environment around your natural supports to get that support, it's tremendous."—Chris, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

"That was the highlight of my time in foster care, being able to see my brother and spend time with him, even though it was only for 3 or 4 hours at a time. He would give me shoes and clothes and CDs to listen to. I would look forward to that time."—Sam, a young adult who transitioned out of foster care

- **Arizona's** Department of Child Safety provides [transition-planning guidance](#) that emphasizes the importance of developing social connections for youth. The transition-planning process includes documentation of a youth's primary supports, which include anyone the young person identifies as part of an important relationship. Objectives are created around these social connections, for example, "Visit my siblings more often" or "Meet with my mentor more consistently," which help youth grow the amount of support they have as they transition out of foster care.

## FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR TRANSITION PLANS

The [Fostering Connections Act](#) requires that a personalized transition plan must be finalized no later than 90 days prior to the youth turning age 18. The most challenging, yet critical, element of the Fostering Connections Act is the provision that each plan should be "as detailed as the child may elect." This requirement shifts child welfare workers' focus to educating and supporting youth as they decide what specifics they would like in their plans. One way child welfare workers can implement this is by going through a worksheet that details the goals of the plan with youth during a series of youth-led meetings. It is important to note that while youth have the right to refuse to participate in a formal transition process, caseworkers still need to make, as well as document, their efforts to engage youth in transition planning until they exit care.

<sup>3</sup> A case plan is a living document that describes the outcomes, goals, and tasks concerning a child's care while in placement. These goals include ensuring that the child receives safe and proper care while in State custody and that appropriate services are provided to the parents and foster parents, as well as determining goals and objectives families must meet to create a safe, permanent home for the child. Progress is monitored by the caseworker and may affect court proceedings.

The [Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act](#) requires agencies to consult with a youth age 14 and older in developing or revising their case plans and to require a document describing the rights of the youth to education, health, visitation, and court participation as well as the right to stay safe and avoid exploitation.<sup>3</sup>

The Administration for Children and Families issued a [program instruction \(PI\)](#) for the Fostering Connections Act and an [information memorandum](#) for the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act in 2010 and 2014, respectively, which provided additional guidance and reiterated other requirements for planning, such as the following:

- Case plans must include a written or recorded description of the programs and services available to help youth in foster care age 16 or older prepare for the transition from care.
- Permanency hearings for youth age 16 or older must determine the necessary services to help them transition from foster care to independent living.
- Youth age 14 and older have the right to help develop their own case and transition plans.
- The case plan must do the following:
  - Document the youth's education, health, visitation, and court participation rights
  - Give the youth the right to receive an annual credit report and assistance in correcting any inaccuracies

- Require the inclusion of a signed acknowledgement that the youth was provided these rights and that they were explained in an age-appropriate way
- Be developed in consultation with the youth and, if the youth wants, with the help of two members of the case-planning team who are not the caseworker or foster parent
- The case plan and permanency hearing must describe the services available to help youth transition to adulthood.

The PI, which requires case plans to include available services starting at age 16, together with the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, which lowers the age youth can begin to be involved in their transition planning to age 14, reflects and promotes best practices. The more time youth have to prepare for their transition from foster care, the more successful they will be.

Visit Information Gateway for more on [Major Federal Legislation Concerned With Child Protection, Child Welfare, and Adoption](#).

Youth transitioning from foster care may require official documentation verifying their foster care status and the specific dates they were in care. It is best practice for caseworkers or other professionals to assist youth in completing this process, as such documentation is often necessary to access benefits such as scholarships or financial aid for college or vocational training.

Federal law requires that children in foster care age 14 or older receive a free, annual credit check and assistance in resolving any credit problems caused by fraud or identity theft. In most cases, children under 18 should not have a credit report, as they do not have the legal capacity to enter into financial contracts. Credit checks conducted for a child should typically confirm that no credit report exists. Young people in foster care are more vulnerable to identity theft since their personal information is repeatedly shared as part of their involvement in the child welfare system. Youth who experience identity theft may have trouble securing a job, renting an apartment, or getting a student loan due to a negative credit report. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has provided [information for caseworkers on how to check a credit report for youth in foster care](#) and what to do if there is evidence of fraud or identity theft.

Additionally, upon exiting care, youth should be provided with copies of all essential records, including educational documentation, to support their successful transition to independence. For more information on college programs and supports for youth who have experienced foster care, read [Postsecondary Support for Youth Who Have Been in Foster Care](#).

## National Youth in Transition Database

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 required the Children's Bureau to establish a system to track the services States provide to youth in and formerly in foster care as well as collect outcome data that could be used to assess State performance in providing services. In response, the Children's Bureau developed the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), which collects data directly from youth through a survey. To learn more about NYTD, visit the [Children's Bureau website](#).

## CONCLUSION

Youth need many things to successfully transition from foster care, such as employment, housing, health care, financial literacy skills, adult relationships, social supports, and personal records. While there are Federal requirements for transition planning, it is important to view planning as a process that unfolds over time that allows youth to take the lead rather than as a checklist of items to accomplish. Thankfully, many States have begun taking this approach. Without a comprehensive transition plan they have helped create and buy in to, youth may enter the adult world less prepared than their peers who were not in foster care—especially if they leave care without a network of caring adults. Transitioning to adulthood can be an emotionally daunting time for youth, but aging out of foster care can make the experience more complex and challenging.

While it is important to make sure that every youth who transitions out of care has a home and a work or education plan, it is also important to consider the young person's individual long-term goals and integrate them into the plan. Beginning a youth's transition planning early and breaking the long-term goals into smaller, strengths-based short-term goals can help make them more manageable, and meaningful involvement will increase youth engagement. States are making progress in their transition-planning efforts, but there is still room for growth. The growing literature on effective programs and practices for transition planning will be an asset as agencies seeking to improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care.

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