



Transition  
to  
Adulthood

A Guide for Those Who Work with Youth  
In the Foster Care System

## The Transition to Adulthood

Each year, approximately a hundred young people in New Mexico transition out of the foster care system with the expectation that they will be able to live “self-sufficiently.” This transition can leave young people in a unique and often difficult position. They may be struggling with the internal and external aftermath of having survived abuse and neglect or losing family members, while also facing the normal challenges of adolescence and young adulthood. Some youth have been in foster care for many years and have had multiple foster placements. Once these young people turn 18, they are expected to live on their own without family or other support systems.

Like all youth going out on their own, young people transitioning out of foster care must juggle the demands of daily life – finishing school, holding down a job, finding affordable housing, paying rent and bills, navigating health care needs – but they often do it without the stability, support, and protective care of parents and guardians.

These extraordinary young people have the potential and the right to become participating and contributing citizens in society.

This booklet suggests many different ways of supporting young people as they transition to adulthood. Increasingly, research shows that without adequate support and guidance, older foster care youth who “age-out” of care have an increased risk of dropping out of school, being unemployed, or becoming homeless, incarcerated, or dependent on government assistance. It is crucial that we act assertively to reverse these trends. In order to ensure that youth are prepared to successfully manage adult responsibilities, we must:

- raise our expectations for foster youth, and work to communicate these expectations clearly and realistically,
- provide foster youth with training and support they may need to develop concrete and realistic plans for the future,
- continue to support them as they transition out of foster care, and
- provide opportunities for youth to have some type of permanent connection to a trusting adult.



## What do young people need to become successful adults?

Being a young person, whether in foster care or not, means dealing with the regular teenage realities of school, extracurricular activities, work, budgets, dating, and peer relationships – all while coping with physical and emotional changes, insecurities about the future, and other challenges of becoming an adult. In order to make that transition successfully, all young people need:

- positive connections, especially with family, peer groups, schools, communities, and cultures;
- mentors, adults to provide personal and emotional support to young people, whether members of the youth's extended family or other adults;
- resilience, the capacity for adapting to change and stressful events in healthy and flexible ways;
- self-determination, the ability to think for oneself and take action consistent with one's choices;
- a positive belief in the future, hope and optimism, the belief that one can achieve one's desired goals;
- a clear and positive identity and sense of self.



In many ways, youth leaving the foster care system are similar to other youth when facing the challenges of transitioning to adulthood. However, they often face these challenges without the benefit of a trusted parent and/or guardian to help them navigate through them. Many of the things they need to transition successfully – connections, mentors, self-determination, hope and optimism – may not be readily available. They often cannot rely on family members for support and guidance. They have had few opportunities to think for themselves and make their own life choice decisions. They are not typically encouraged to have high expectations for themselves and their futures.

There are things we can do, including helping young people plan for and address the educational, health and mental health, employment, and housing needs they may face while in foster care and when they leave.

## Health & Mental Health Needs

Young people in foster care receive regular health and dental check-ups, and their health care costs are covered through Medicaid. Once a young person leaves foster care, he or she may be eligible for Medicaid through the Income Support Division until age 19, on the condition that they complete high school.

It is also important for a young person to continue to have regular check-ups and receive the health, mental health, and dental care needed. Many studies indicate that youth in foster care are at a higher risk for health-related problems. This may be a result of a complicated family history, inadequate medical care, and lack of continuity of care. In addition, youth may need education about substance abuse, diet and nutrition, exercise, sexual health, contraceptive use and abortion, pregnancy and parenthood.<sup>1,2</sup>

### What You Can Do

- Help youth get the information they need to maintain good physical and mental health.
- Help ensure that a young person with a diagnosis or condition requiring ongoing treatment understands the diagnosis and action required and knows how to continue the needed care.
- Ensure that a young person currently taking medication understands why the medication is necessary and is able to manage it without supervision.
- Provide support and training in coping mechanisms and dealing with setbacks and rejections.
- Help youth find medical services that provide a sliding scale or are free.



Some  
questions to  
ask young  
people:

- √ When was the last time you went to see a doctor? Dentist? Optometrist? OB/GYN?
- √ If you needed to see a doctor or a dentist, do you know how to access these services and how would you pay for them?
- √ Do you have health insurance?
- √ Do you know how apply for continued Medicaid coverage after you leave foster care?
- √ Are you currently taking any medications? What are they for?
- √ Do you have access to healthy/nutritional foods at school/home?
- √ How can I support you?

## Education

Like all young people, youth in foster care and youth aging out need a solid education to ensure a successful future. Having an adequate education is an important building block to finding employment, affording stable housing, and obtaining needed health care. However, too often these youth do not obtain a high school diploma or pursue higher education goals. The reasons vary but may include a lack of school stability or continuity, lack of an advocate, quality of schools and education services, discipline issues, and stigma.<sup>1,2</sup> Educational assistance, including financial aid, may be available thru CYFD's Independent Living Program (see pages 8-9 of this booklet for more information).

### What You Can Do

- Help make it possible for the youth to stay in the same school, even with placement changes.
- Offer assistance and support in obtaining a high school diploma, college guidance, and help with college applications.
- Always present college or vocational training programs as viable options.
- Ensure that youth have (or can get) a complete copy of their own education record.



Some  
questions to  
ask young  
people:

- √ How are things going at school? Are there things you like/dislike about school? What are they and why?
- √ Are you involved in any activities at school? Do you want to be? How can I help you get involved?
- √ What are your educational goals? What are your career plans? What do you want to do after high school?
- √ Do you need financial aid in order to go to school? Do you know how to find out about grants, scholarships, and tuition waivers? Do you need help filling out financial aid and other applications?
- √ Do you have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)? Do you attend any school meetings about you, including IEP meetings?
- √ Are you in special education? Do you believe you are being challenged and learning?
- √ How can I support you?

# Employment

Young people face numerous problems finding and maintaining jobs. Preparing young people who are aging out of foster care for entrance into the workplace is not always easy, but early planning and reliable continuing services are key to assisting youth in smooth transitions from foster care to self-sufficiency.<sup>2</sup>

## What You Can Do

- Encourage youth to get involved in appropriate job training programs. If possible, provide them a list with contact information for those programs.
- Support youth in the job application and interview process. Provide them an example of an application.
- Encourage job placement and retention training.
- Encourage the young person to set short and long term goals.
- Serve as a mentor for the young person, assisting him/her through your employment skills and experience.
- Provide a list of documentation youth will need to obtain employment.
- Teach them communication skills that will assist them in maintaining employment.



- Some questions to ask young people:
- √ What kind of career are you interested in pursuing?
  - √ Have you ever had a job? Have you had any job skill training?
  - √ If you had a job, what happened? What would have helped you stay at that job?
  - √ Are there people (teachers, friends, former employers etc...) who could provide references for you?
  - √ What kind of training/information do you think you need to make it easier to find a job?
  - √ Do you have information about programs such as Job Corp, Americorps and the Conservation Corps?
  - √ If you were having difficulties in your job, would you know how to go about resolving them?
  - √ How can I support you?

# Housing

Youth transitioning out of foster care clearly need safe, stable, and affordable housing. Without proper resources and support, youth aging out of foster care are at an increased risk for homelessness. Through CYFD's Independent Living Program (see the next page for more information), young people age 18 and over can get assistance to pay for housing and support as they begin life on their own.<sup>2</sup> Some eligible foster care youth, may be able to receive assistance before they turn 18 years of age, with their social worker and/or guardian's approval.



## What You Can Do

- Make sure young people know about the resources available when they turn 18 through CYFD's Independent Living Program.
- Assist young people in accessing transitional and permanent housing.
- Provide training in daily living skills.
- Help determine if the young person qualifies for government housing assistance and help them figure out how to get on the list.

Some questions to ask young people:

- √ Where are you living now? Do you like it there? Do you feel safe living there? Is there anything you want to talk about?
- √ Where do you want to live and why?
- √ What income resources do you have? How much of your income do you plan to spend on rent?
- √ If you are going to continue in school after leaving foster care, can you apply for scholarship money or other funds to help with the cost of housing? Do you need help doing this?
- √ Are there adults in your life who would be able to help you find housing?
- √ Have you ever signed a rental agreement or lease? Do you know what a lease requires?
- √ How can I support you?

## CYFD's Independent Living Program

The Children, Youth & Families Department (CYFD) Protective Services offers older youth in CYFD custody or who have aged out of foster care a range of independent living services. The CYFD Independent Living program helps prepare youth to successfully manage adult responsibilities and achieve self-sufficiency.

Each youth participating in the Independent Living Program must have a written Transitional Living Plan (TLP). The CYFD Worker and the young person work together to develop the TLP. The TLP addresses several areas of day-to-day living competencies, including health care, budgeting, and housing.

Among the services provided through the Independent Living Program are:

- ❖ **Skills for Adult Independent Living (SAIL):** SAIL involves 16 weeks of classes covering daily living skills, including budgeting, locating and maintaining housing, career planning, educational/vocational planning, transportation, health, sexuality, social/leisure time, and religious/spiritual issues. SAIL also includes a therapeutic/counseling component.
- ❖ **Semi-Independent Living (SIL) Placement:** If a young person demonstrates readiness and an ability to live on his/her own with limited supervision from CYFD, then an SIL contract will be developed. At a minimum, an SIL contract:
  - describes a youth's living environment,
  - details an education, work, and/or transitional living plan,
  - outlines prohibited youth behaviors,
  - provides details for obtaining medical care,
  - outlines the responsibilities of both the youth and the CYFD Worker, including regular contact,
  - identifies a support system, and
  - includes an emergency response plan to assist the young person.

SIL placements can be in a former foster home, with a relative, with a roommate, in college or Job Corps, in a private apartment, even out-of-state. The SIL program provides start up funds – a one-time grant to get started in the SIL placement – which can be used for rent, utilities, deposits, furniture, and household items. The program also provides a monthly stipend, as arranged in the youth's SIL contract.

- ❖ **Financial Assistance:** In addition to SIL stipends, some financial assistance may be available for current and former foster youth for education and other expenses. Through the Protective Services County Offices, youth may be able to receive cash for incidentals, including graduation expenses, extracurricular activities, and even vacations. Money for incidentals must be approved by the County Office Manager.
- ❖ **Youth Advocates for New Mexico (YANM)** – Participants in the CYFD Independent Living Program can become members of the Youth Advocates for New Mexico. Youth Advocates travel to national conferences, plan New Mexico’s annual Independent Living Conferences, and make presentations at other conferences and training events. Members of YANM advocate for foster youth by working for changes in laws, assisting in revising current policies and procedures that affect other foster youth in care, and other advocacy activities.



### What Is the Chaffee Program & How Does it Help Youth?

**The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999** (the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program) provides states with funds for support and training for youth who are aging out of foster care. These funds can be used for:

- independent living activities,
- housing assistance, including room and board,
- support to complete educational or therapeutic goals,
- training in gaining and maintaining employment,

Chaffee Educational Training Vouchers (ETV) help current and former foster youth or youth adopted at age 16 and older (up to age 23) who are enrolled in a post-secondary educational setting. Up to \$5,000 annually could be available for eligible youth for tuition and fees, books, room and board, transportation, a computer, study abroad, etc. Funds cannot exceed the school’s cost of attendance. In order to apply for ETV funds, the young person must have a TLP or a SIL contract which specifically addresses his/her successful completion of secondary education; completion of required applications, tests, and financial aid forms; and other issues related to school attendance.

## Additional Considerations

### Cultural Competency

Cultural competency is the ability to effectively work with, support, and affirm people from a variety of ethnic, cultural, economic, and religious backgrounds. It is being aware and respectful of the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and parenting styles of different young people and families, and understanding that there is as wide a range of differences within groups as between them.



Cultural competency encompasses a range of attitudes, perspectives and practices that prepare young people to live within their culture of origin as well as in the larger society. Most importantly, cultural competency is about challenging our own assumptions, stereotypes, and beliefs and developing skills and awareness. Practicing cultural competency is vitally important while working with all young people in our changing society.

### Youth with Disabilities

Youth with physical, mental health, or developmental disabilities – who are already struggling with the stigma and difficulties sometimes associated with foster care – may have a harder time finding and maintaining a job, obtaining stable housing, and navigating an often complicated health care system. However, there are a number of federal supports available for youth with disabilities. It is crucial to diagnose youth with disabilities as early as possible, find appropriate educational services, connect youth with supportive services prior to exiting foster care, and empower older youth with both the skills and the resources to continue accessing the services they may need in their adult lives.<sup>2</sup> For more information on youth with disabilities, visit the Kids as Self Advocates website, [www.fvkasa.org](http://www.fvkasa.org).

## **Undocumented Youth**

When undocumented youth in the foster care system reach 18, they become especially vulnerable. They face the same challenges as other youth in foster care, with additional hardships such as the isolation that comes from language and education barriers and/or the fear of deportation. Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) is a federal law allowing undocumented youth in the child welfare system to petition for lawful permanent resident status in the U.S. It is important that undocumented youth know their rights and their options and have support to negotiate these systems.<sup>2</sup> For more information about SIJS, visit the Center for Human Rights & Constitutional Law website, <http://immigrantchildren.org/SIJS/>. For more information about the rights of undocumented youth, check out [www.somosunpueblounido.org](http://www.somosunpueblounido.org).

## **Teen Parents**

A growing number of youth in foster care become parents while in the child welfare system. These young people are caught between the stresses of high school and college or job preparation, and the demands of caring for an infant or toddler. Young mothers in foster care have a right to be placed with their babies, but this may create difficulties in the foster placement. And we can't forget that young fathers in foster care have parental rights, too. When young parents leave foster care, it is important that they have been provided services and parenting skills to help them care for their children on their own.<sup>2</sup> For information on the rights of pregnant and parenting teens in foster care, check out [www.teenparents.org](http://www.teenparents.org). You might also look in your community for programs and support services for teen parents.

## **Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Questioning Youth**

It is impossible to accurately determine the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) youth in the foster care system, but some studies suggest LGBTQ youth make up between 5 - 10% of the total foster youth population. For reasons related to stigma and prejudice, LGBTQ young people, in general, are at a disproportionate risk for running away from home, dropping out of school, and committing suicide. It is important that we ensure that LGBTQ young people have the resources and support they need while in the foster care system. For more information on LGBTQ youth in foster care, go to the Safe Schools website, <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-homeless.html>.

## Youth Attorneys – Giving Youth a Voice

As of June 2005, the New Mexico Children’s Code requires that a **Youth Attorney** be appointed for a young person in foster care who is age 14 or over. Before age 14, a young person in foster care is appointed a Guardian ad Litem who represents the young person’s *best interests*. The Youth Attorney represents the young person’s *expressed wishes*. In this way, the young person has a more direct role in his or her case. Any actions taken by the Youth Attorney are only done after consultation with the client. The Youth Attorney counsels the client that the Judge must make decisions based on the *best interest of the child*, and the Judge must be convinced that what the young person wants is in his or her best interest.

### References:

1. National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Asking the Right Questions: A Judicial Checklist to Ensure That the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care Are Being Addressed. *Permanency Planning for Children Department*. 2005.
2. United States Department of Health and Human Services, McNaught K, Onkeles L. Improving Outcomes for Older Youth; What judges and attorneys need to know. *National Resource Center for Youth Development*. 2004.

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