

Examining Act 91

A Study to Ensure the Effective Implementation of Extended Foster Care in Pennsylvania

This document provides an overview of the Examining Act 91 study which will use a variety of data sources to understand the strengths and weakness of the implementation of extended foster care in Pennsylvania.

BACKGROUND

Pennsylvania has a long history of being in the forefront of best practices and policy to help youth in foster care make a successful transition to adulthood. An important turning point was Pennsylvania's implementation of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Act 91) in 2012. Act 91 enables more youth to remain in foster care past age 18 and, for the first time, allows them to re-enter foster care between age 18 and 21 if they need support. This law was enacted in response to research that showed that, when compared to youth who exited care at age 18, youth who remained in care experienced much better outcomes—especially in the areas of education and employment. Act 91 aims to end the disturbing trend of youth aging out of foster care to homelessness and other poor adult outcomes. It also seeks to provide youth in foster care the kind of support and safety net that children receive routinely from their families.

To aid in the continued effort to provide high quality services to older foster youth in Pennsylvania, Juvenile Law Center is partnering with the Stoneleigh Foundation to research the impact of this legislation through a project entitled, Examining Act 91: A Study to Ensure the Effective Implementation of Extended Foster Care in Pennsylvania. This study will focus on answering several questions: how many youth are choosing to remain in care; which youth are deciding to extend their time in care and which are opting

out; what services are most effective at producing successful adult outcomes; and, most importantly, whether youth and child welfare stakeholders think the law is adequately meeting the needs of youth and young adults. Answering these vital questions will ensure that Pennsylvania can improve its services and continue its role as a leader in the effort to support transition age foster youth.

GOALS

The goal of this research is to describe the strengths and weaknesses of extended foster care and resumption of jurisdiction (“re-entry”), and allow Pennsylvania to continue to strengthen and improve its services and supports for older youth. Improving services for older youth will help provide all youth with the best chance of being successful, thriving adults who are connected to family and their communities.

METHODS

Stoneleigh Fellow Dominique Mikell will complete her research using a mixed method analysis. First, she will analyze state-level quantitative data to determine the demographics of youth who remain in care between 18-21 years to examine trends both in terms of characteristics of youth who stay versus those who leave. This analysis will also enable her to determine the needs of those who do remain in care, such as whether they are parenting or have a special need or disability. Second, Dominique will qualitatively gather information from key stakeholders. She will interview leaders about statewide extended foster care policies and their implementation. She will conduct focus groups and interviews with older foster youth and alumni of the foster care system as well as the individuals that serve them directly such as attorneys, judges, and caseworkers. The research aims to get a statewide picture of Act 91’s implementation, but also will delve more deeply in three to four Pennsylvania counties to learn more about the challenges and successes in Act 91’s implementation.

PROJECT LEAD

Dominique Mikell began this project at Juvenile Law Center in September 2016 through a two year Stoneleigh Foundation Emerging Leader Fellowship. Dominique comes to Juvenile Law Center from the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, where she completed her AM degree and worked as a research assistant for the California Youth Transition to Adulthood (CalYOUTH) Study led by Dr. Mark Courtney. The CalYOUTH Study evaluated the implementation of California’s extended foster care legislation, known as AB 12.

For more information please visit www.jlc.org to get updates on this project. If you have questions, or want to see how you or your county can get involved, contact Dominique at dmikell@jlc.org or 215-265-0551 ext. 133.