

Responding to COVID 19: How You Can Support Older Youth in Pennsylvania who are Experiencing Homelessness or Have Experience in Foster Care

Many youth who have experienced homelessness or spent time in foster care do not have access to a strong support system to which they can turn in times of crisis like this one. Young people who are living with or still being supported by their parents are often able to rely on parents and family to guide and support them and talk through crises like these. However, for many youth who currently or previously have experience in foster care, and youth experiencing homelessness, the lack of familial support means they may not have help to prepare for, respond to, or cope with a public health crisis such as COVID 19. **This publication aims to give you concrete tips and resources so that you can play a vital role in supporting young people in Pennsylvania during the COVID 19 crisis so they can stay healthy and maintain their educational success.**

- 1. Check in on youth as frequently as possible during this period of time and provide emotional support and reliable information.**

Higher education homeless and foster care liaisons, caseworkers, Independent Living Workers, CASAs, and lawyers should check in with young people frequently and provide emotional support, information and resources. A health scare and increased instability may be traumatizing, cause anxiety, or bring up traumas or experiences from the past for many young people. Let youth know you are there for them so they do not feel alone. Be there for youth to talk things through, provide concrete information about resources and supports, and be equipped to help connect them with services and supports. Here are [some tips](#) about helping young people manage their anxiety around the virus. **Proactive adult-initiated regular check-ins with youth are highly recommended! Young people should have access to multiple caring and supportive adults during times like these!**

- 2. Help youth find and fund a place to live, and access services, if youth are in college and must leave the residence halls.**

Students who have experience in foster care or are experiencing homelessness may not have a home to go to if they need to leave their dorm or residence hall. Some institutions are providing options for students to remain on campus, while others are asking students to leave immediately. Consider reaching out to the young person's school, with their consent, to see what options may be available. We must make sure these young people do not experience homelessness or end up in other unsafe living situations due to displacement.

- Pennsylvania child welfare agencies must help students who are in foster care or extended foster care (i.e. foster care past age 18) find a placement or another place to live.** Child welfare agencies should reach out to all of their youth in college or training programs and help them arrange for placement and address any other needs like accessing food, health care, and mental health support. Advocates may need to help to make sure this process occurs. Help the youth reach out to their own children and youth caseworker and ask for help. Here is contact information for all county Children and Youth agencies in PA:

<https://www.dhs.pa.gov/docs/OCYF/Documents/Directory%20of%20Services.pdf>

- **For students experiencing homelessness**, look at potential housing options listed on [this SHC tip sheet](#). Consider partnering with a local hotel/motel for temporary housing, or petition to remain on campus.

3. Help youth access programs and funds that could assist in meeting emergency needs, including housing.

- **Chafee Aftercare Services for Youth Who Have Been In Foster Care:** The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood Program is a federal law that provides funds to all states to support youth who have aged out of foster care as they transition to adulthood. One of the services that can be provided is assistance with room and board, which can include help finding temporary housing, and help paying for rent and food. Child welfare agencies should proactively reach out to Chafee-eligible youth and let them know of the availability of Chafee room and board funds and Chafee aftercare services to assist them during this crisis.

Case workers and advocates should help youth request these services and funds by contacting their county Independent Living Coordinator in the county where the youth is now living. [Child welfare agencies are obligated](#) to provide these services to young people who are Chafee eligible and living in their county. You can find the contact information for IL coordinators in each PA county here: http://www.payab.pitt.edu/IL_Contacts.htm

- **Emergency funds from institutions or organizations:** Students experiencing homelessness (with or without involvement in foster care) can utilize [emergency aid](#), if available from their universities or other community groups, to help with unexpected expenses related to the COVID 19 crisis. **If you are a school or agency that has the capacity to develop these funds, we encourage you to do so!**
- **Together We Rise, a non-profit organization, is trying to provide emergency assistance** to as many college students as possible who have been displaced and have experience in foster care. Help young people fill out [this form](#) to see if they can get help from Together We Rise.
- **U-Haul will provide 30 days of free self-storage** at U-Haul-owned and -operated facilities to help college students impacted by the virus. The free month applies to new customers with college IDs and is a limited-time offer subject to availability. Click on uhaul.com/storage to find local stores.

4. Create youth- and young adult-friendly materials to explain what is happening and what young people should do to stay healthy, as well as when to seek care.

This is undoubtedly the first time youth and young adults have experienced a public health crisis of this type and magnitude. It is extremely scary and confusing. They need information that is clear and understandable and they need it to be delivered in ways that they can consume. For example, terms like “social distancing” should be explained in ways that are clear and help youth protect themselves. Consider these [tips](#) from The Hope Center about Supporting #RealCollege Students During COVID 19.

5. Help young people access local resources that provide the most recent information about the frequently changing conditions and access to new resources and supports.

Young people may need help understanding what information sources are reliable. Help them identify reliable sources for news and information. For example, in Philadelphia, young people can receive the latest updates from the City of Philadelphia by texting COVIDPHL to 888-777 or going to www.phila.gov/COVID-19.

Encourage students to consult their college's or program's websites on a regular basis for any changes. They should also use school portals or email to connect with their teachers regarding any questions or concerns they have concerning assignments or access to the internet.

6. Create forums and opportunities for youth and young adults to connect with each other. Ensure youth have technology and other virtual/safe resources to participate in remote learning and stay connected with peers and other supports.

- **Ensure youth have necessary technology.** First, help young people take advantage of opportunities to continue their studies. While some colleges may be continuing classes online, it is critical to recognize that students might not have access to the internet, laptops, or a safe and stable place to study. Youth and young adults from foster care, or who are experiencing homelessness, often rely on public spaces for internet access, to meet with friends, and to find safety. If we are telling young people to stay away from these public spaces, we need to provide alternative educational opportunities, such as providing laptops, wi-fi hotspots, and a place to take classes and study.

- **Connect youth with the following free or affordable internet services:** Comcast is offering free broadband internet to low-income households. To qualify for Internet Essentials, youth must be eligible for public assistance programs such as the National School Lunch Program, Medicaid, or SNAP: <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/comcast-free-broadband-low-income-households-coronavirus-1203532765/>

Spectrum is also offering free internet for students in K-12. Contact them at: <https://www.wect.com/2020/03/15/spectrum-offer-free-internet-students-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>

- **Students who have experience in foster care may be eligible for free laptops through One Simple Wish.** Help young people email info@onesimplewish.org if they need a laptop for remote learning.
- **Provide young people with safe ways to maintain social connections that will help them get through this challenging time.** Create opportunities for togetherness and community that are alternatives to congregating in groups and public spaces so they do not feel alone. Doing “watch parties” on the internet, scheduling online or web-based activities should be considered. You can also help youth stay connected by setting up a private Facebook page for groups to safely talk and provide support to one another.

7. Help youth take care of their health and behavioral health needs.

Assist youth with receiving appropriate physical and behavioral health care. This includes helping youth continue to meet existing needs and also meeting any new needs that have arisen during this crisis. Help

youth connect with their treatment providers to figure out how to continue treatment, including appointments and prescriptions. Help youth access telehealth options for medical appointments if needed.

8. Help Young People Maintain any Public Benefits that May Be Impacted by Changes in Work or Training Schedules and Assist them in Receiving Work Study Wages.

A young person’s work hours may be cut or suspended due to COVID precautionary measures and this may impact their receipt of crucial public benefits like SNAP, TANF, or CCIS (child care). Please work with youth to check in with their caseworkers at the County Assistance Office to create a contingency plan to remain in compliance. [Federal guidance](#) allows schools to pay work study students if work is no longer possible due to school closures. Assist youth in receiving these wages.

