

## Part 4: Support Services in the Community

**Introduction:** One of the biggest keys to retention and success in higher education is having a support system that provides helpful advice, assistance, motivation and care. A good support system provides students with consistency, confidence, and support to fall back on when life becomes challenging. Youth with experience in foster care may not have this type of support. Some of the readers of this guide will form part of the youth's support network as they enter higher education and training. This section provides some basic information on community resources that can help youth build out their network of support.

There are many community-based resources that can assist students with their higher education success. Many students around the country, including students with experience in foster care, struggle with meeting their basic needs while they go to college. Connecting youth with campus based and community resources can provide a safety net for students so they can spend more time and energy on their education. Some campuses may have a benefits hub where students can access numerous federal, state, community, and campus benefits in one place. Building a strong support network is one of the most important things you can do to help ensure a student's long-term success. This section includes some basic information about the following: food assistance, **public benefits** (TANF, WIC, LIHEAP, SSI, and childcare) and health insurance.

### Tips on Accessing Public Benefits

The easiest way to apply for many public benefits in PA is to complete the Compass screening here: <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/compass.web/Public/CMPHome>. Compass will screen individuals and families for assistance with food, cash, medical insurance, free or reduced meals, food stamps, and energy assistance. If a young person needs more help with the application, call your local legal aid organization and food banks to see if they can provide assistance.

## Food Assistance

### What are food stamps?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), often called "food stamps," provides funds to participants to buy food items by using an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) on eligible food items<sup>56</sup>. There is also an Android and Apple app that can be downloaded.<sup>57</sup>

### Can someone who is in a program of higher education or training be eligible for food stamps?

If an individual is attending a four-year school, they *may* be eligible for SNAP in some situations if they are very low income:

A young adult *may* be eligible for SNAP if they attend a four-year college or training program and the following apply:

1. receiving public assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families TANF program;

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligible-food-items>

<sup>57</sup> To find out more about SNAP and efforts to make it more accessible to college students, see HOPE CTR., BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO SNAP (2019), [https://cufba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HopeCenterBrief\\_1.pdf](https://cufba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HopeCenterBrief_1.pdf).

2. taking part in a state or federal work study program;
3. working at least 20 hours a week;
4. taking care of child who is under age 6;
5. taking care of a child under age 12 **and** are in college full time;
6. enrolling less than half time.

**If a youth is attending a community college, they may also be eligible for SNAP if they are enrolled in classes that prepare them for employment in high priority field or are in technical education training programs.** The list<sup>58</sup> of the areas of study is extensive and many community college students will be eligible for SNAP based on this policy.

For more information on SNAP for students in programs of higher education and training in Pennsylvania, check this link: <https://clsphila.org/public-benefits/what-colleges-need-to-know-snap/>. It is important to check requirements often, as new legislation and changes to policy can change eligibility criteria.

### **How can students apply for SNAP?**

Anyone can apply for SNAP at their local county assistance office or online at <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/compass.web/Public/CMPHome>. This website will also allow individuals to apply for other Pennsylvania benefits. The Compass Helpline can help locate the closest benefits office and answer any additional questions at 1-800-692-7462.

### **Are there other resources to help students who are struggling getting or affording food?**

**Food banks and pantries** are a resource to support people, including students, who are struggling to afford food. Community members can visit food banks and pantries to pick up food free of charge. Here are some ways to find out locations of food banks in the community:

- Central Pennsylvania Food Bank provides food and nutrient assistance to those living in the greater Central Pennsylvania area. You can find the location of food pantries at this link, <https://www.centralpafoodbank.org/find-help/find-a-food-pantry/> or by calling, 717-564-1700.
- FoodPantries.Org is a national food pantry website that lists food pantries by state and county. The Pennsylvania specific list of food pantries can be found on their website at <https://www.foodpantries.org/st/pennsylvania>.

Feeding America is a national organization focused on ending hunger in the United States. The organization compiles a list of Pennsylvania specific food banks that can be found at <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/pennsylvania>. The National Hunger Hotline is 1-866-348-6479 (English) or 1-877-842-6273 (Spanish); the hotline provides information on the closest foodbank, meal site, groceries, and similar food related resources.

Many colleges and universities also have food pantries available on their campus for all students to access.

**Meal Swipe or Voucher Programs:** Meal swipe programs are programs on campus that allow students to donate unused funds on their meal plan for the use of students who need assistance paying for food. Many colleges have these programs.

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.workstats.dli.pa.gov/Products/HPOs/Pages/default.aspx>

**Emergency aid from staff and faculty:** Some schools have set up emergency funds for students who need help paying for food and other basic needs.

## Financial Assistance through Federal or State Benefit of Subsidy Programs

### **What is TANF?**

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides cash assistance to pregnant or parenting individuals who are very low income.<sup>59</sup>

### **Are individuals who are in programs of higher education or training eligible for TANF?**

Possibly. In addition to income and other eligibility requirements for TANF, individuals must meet work requirements. Sometimes enrolling in an education or training program can meet work requirements, but individuals should check with their county assistance worker to make sure eligibility for benefits can be maintained while attending higher education or training.

### **How do students apply for TANF?**

Anyone can apply for TANF at their local county assistance office or online at <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/compass.web/Public/CMPHome>. Individuals can apply for any PA public benefits at this website. The Compass Helpline can help locate the closest benefits office and answer any additional questions at 1-800-692-7462.

### **What is Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)?**

Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program is a special supplemental food program for women, infants, and children up to the age of 5. WIC provides funds to purchase food, such as milk, eggs, peanut butter, infant formula, and some fruits and vegetables.

### **Are individuals who are in programs of higher education or training eligible for WIC?**

Yes, if the applicant is pregnant or parenting, they may be eligible. In addition to pregnant women and mothers, this includes fathers who are caring for their children. A household of two people is eligible if they make less than \$29,637 per year.

### **How do students apply for WIC?**

Applications can be made online at <https://www.pawic.com/> or by phone 1-800-942-9467. Please note that WIC has a separate application from the Compass application that is used to assess the need for other public benefits.

### **What is the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)?**

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<sup>59</sup> This is a very brief and incomplete description of public benefits in Pennsylvania and focuses on benefits that may be most helpful to students. More information about public benefits in Pennsylvania is available here: <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/about/DHS-Information/Pages/Your-Benefits-Explained.aspx>.

LIHEAP provides funds so that individuals can pay energy costs like heat and electricity. The program also can provide emergency grants if a household is at risk of being without heat.<sup>60</sup>

### **Are individuals who are in programs of higher education or training eligible for LIHEAP?**

Yes, if they meet eligibility requirements. Individuals making less than \$18,735 or \$25,365 for a family of two, may be eligible for assistance paying the cost to heat their home or apartment. Individuals are eligible even if they are renters.

### **How do students apply for LIHEAP?**

Anyone can apply for LIHEAP at their local county assistance office or online at <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/compass.web/Public/CMPHome>. Youth can also request an application by calling the Statewide LIHEAP Hotline at 1-866-857-7095. To learn more check out this link: <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/Services/Assistance/Pages/LIHEAP.aspx>.

### **What is Supplemental Security Income (SSI)?**

SSI is a cash benefit for individuals who are very low income and have a disability that prevents them from working. The average monthly SSI benefit in PA is \$800.

### **Are individuals who are in programs of higher education or training eligible for SSI?**

Yes. The eligibility determination for SSI depends on the individual's income and whether their disability prevents them from working. If an individual is eligible for SSI, they could attend higher education or training.

### **How does a student apply for SSI?**

SSI is a federal benefit that is administered through local Social Security offices. Applications for SSI can be made at local Social Security Offices or online at <https://www.ssa.gov/applyfordisability/>. An application for SSI will include information about the individual's disability and how it impacts their ability to work and function. It is recommended that individuals considering applying for SSI get assistance from an advocate or attorney because the process can be complicated.

### **What is subsidized childcare assistance through the PA Department of Public Welfare?**

The subsidized childcare program—or Child Care Works-- helps families pay part of their childcare costs.

### **Are individuals who are in programs of higher education or training eligible for childcare assistance?**

To be eligible, an individual must meet income requirements and also must work 20 or more hours a week or work 10 hours and go to school for at least 10 hours a week.

### **How does a student apply for subsidized childcare assistance?**

Anyone can apply for child care assistance at their local county assistance office: <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/Services/Assistance/Pages/CAO-Contact.aspx> or online at <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/compass.web/Public/CMPHome>.

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<sup>60</sup> To find out more about efforts to ensure that students have access to LIHEAP, see HOPE CTR., BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO SNAP (2019, [https://cufba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HopeCenterBrief\\_1.pdf](https://cufba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HopeCenterBrief_1.pdf)).

### **Why is health insurance and health care important to student success in higher education and training?**

When students are healthy, they can focus more on their academics and planning. Many youth in foster care have physical and behavioral health needs. Ensuring that they continue addressing existing physical and behavioral health needs and maintaining their health generally is important to their well-being and success.

Having health insurance allows students to get necessary treatment to maintain good health and address any new issues that arise. Health care can be very expensive; most schools require that youth have insurance so making sure youth are covered is an important part of higher education success. Additionally, many colleges require students to be up-to-date on vaccinations. It is important to locate vaccination records and/or have health insurance that can cover things like physicals and vaccinations.

### **What health insurance do youth have while they are in foster care?**

Most youth in the foster care system are eligible for **Medicaid**, sometimes called Medical Assistance. This is comprehensive health insurance that covers a youth's physical health and behavioral health care needs. In PA, care is provided through **Managed Care Organizations** (MCO) or health plans. The youth will get treatment and care for the providers who are part of the MCO or health plan. If the youth is not currently in foster care, they are only eligible for this coverage if they were in foster care on or after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **What services and treatment does Medicaid cover?**

Medicaid provides comprehensive coverage. When youth are under age 21, Medicaid will cover all services that a doctor deems "medically necessary." This is called the Early and Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) requirement.<sup>61</sup> EPSDT includes physical and behavioral health treatment.

When you are age 21 or older, Medicaid covers basic physical health (preventive care and specialists) and mental health treatment services (counseling, medication, etc). This includes preventive services like flu shots and important things like contraception and birth control. Medicaid also covers prescriptions, vision, dental, physical therapy, and substance abuse treatment.

#### **Accessing Mental Health Supports**

Going away to college and aging out of foster care is can be very traumatic for a young person. Ensuring that the youth has all support needed, including behavioral health treatment if needed is important.

The Mental Health Association of Pennsylvania has Behavioral Health Navigators that can help youth find treatment provider. They can be reached 717-346-0549 or 1-866-578-3659, extension 2 or by email at [navigator@mhapa.org](mailto:navigator@mhapa.org).

### **What health insurance do youth have if they leave foster care at age 18 or older?**

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<sup>61</sup> See 42 U.S. §1396a(43)((A) (West 2019).

As part of the transition planning process, youth should be assisted in identifying the health insurance they will have after leaving care and applying for coverage if needed. The child welfare agency is required to ensure that youth have health care coverage as part of their transition plan before exiting care.

### **What is Medicaid for Former Foster Youth?**

In Pennsylvania, youth who were in foster care at age 18 or older are eligible for **Medicaid as a former foster youth**. A young person is eligible for this coverage until they are age 26.<sup>62</sup> Youth are eligible for this coverage no matter their income. They are eligible because of their former foster care status.

### **What should a young person do to make sure they are covered by Medicaid as a former foster youth?**

If the youth is aging out of foster care at age 18 or older, the caseworker should make sure the youth is enrolled in Medicaid as a former foster youth. The youth should not have to take any action, but they should check with their caseworker to confirm that the process has been completed.

If the youth left care at age 18 or older, and they lost their Medicaid coverage, and are still under age 26, they should apply for Medicaid coverage as a former foster youth. More information about Medicaid for former foster youth and how to apply in PA is available here:

<http://www.healthchoices.pa.gov/info/resources/former-foster-youth/index.htm>. They can apply online at [compass.state.pa.us](http://compass.state.pa.us) or you can go into your local County Assistance Office.

### **How can a young person get health insurance if they are not eligible for Medicaid as a former foster youth?**

Students who left foster care before turning 18 or are not eligible under the former foster youth category may still be eligible for Medicaid as a low-income adult. Pennsylvania has expanded access to Medicaid for adults so the young adult may be eligible. They can apply at the COMPASS website at

<https://www.dhs.pa.gov/Services/Assistance/Pages/COMPASS.aspx>.

A young adult can also call the Consumer Service Center to get help applying for coverage at 1-866-550-4355.

### **Who can a youth call if they need help getting health insurance in PA?**

Youth can contact Pennsylvania Health Law Project (PHLP) for help accessing health insurance.

PHLP's toll-free Helpline is available to anyone living in Pennsylvania who needs help accessing health care coverage or services through the public health system. The Helpline can be reached by calling 1-800-274-3258. Youth can also call the Pennsylvania Health Access Network (PHAN) at 877-570-3642.

### **What actions should youth take with respect to their health care coverage if they are moving from their home county for college or a training program?**

Health care is provided through Managed Care Organizations (MCOS). Sometimes this is referred to as a Health Plan. MCOs contract with doctors in the state who take Medicaid. There are several MCOs that cover different regions of Pennsylvania. **Students or their caseworkers need to make sure that they enroll in an MCO that covers the area of the state where they will be receiving health care during college.**

Here are some actions the youth may need to take to make sure they have health coverage if they move away for college:

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<sup>62</sup> See 42 U.S. §1396a(10)((A)(i)(IX) (West 2019).

- If students are attending college where they currently live, they can keep their current MCO plan and health care providers.
- If students are attending college in another part of the state, but will return to their current home to receive health care, they can keep their current insurance plan, MCO and health care providers.

If students are attending college in a part of PA different than where they currently live and will be living primarily in that area and want to receive health care there, they may need to change your MCO so you can see health care providers where they will be living.

### **How does a student change their MCO if they moving out of county for college?**

- Students should call or go into their local county assistance office and ask them to help change their MCO. Students should note that they are moving and want to make sure they have a plan that covers the area where their college or program is located.
- Staff at the county assistance office will let the youth know if their current MCO serves the county they are moving to for college. If it does not, the youth will be asked to select a new MCO.
- If the youth does change his or her MCO, they will then need to select health care providers that accept the new MCO.
- Physical health and behavioral health may be covered by different insurance plans. Remember that if students need to change MCOs, they may need to change for both physical health and behavioral health.

Here is a list of health insurance providers in PA for physical health:

<http://www.healthchoices.pa.gov/providers/about/physical/index.htm>.

Here is a list of health insurance providers in PA for behavioral health:

<http://www.healthchoices.pa.gov/providers/about/behavioral/>.

### **What happens to a student's Medicaid coverage if they attend college outside of Pennsylvania?**

If a student is attending college outside of Pennsylvania but will return to their current home in Pennsylvania to receive health care, they can keep their Medicaid coverage and current health insurance plan and health care providers.

If youth move out of PA and will receive their health and behavioral health care in that state, they will need to apply for Medicaid in that state. Depending on the laws of that state, they may or may not be eligible for Medicaid:

- If the youth was in foster care at age 18 or older and are moving to any of the following states to attend college they may be eligible for Medicaid coverage as a former foster youth: California, Delaware, Kentucky, Massachusetts, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, Wisconsin.
- Students moving to other states will need to apply for Medicaid in that state and should check that state's Medicaid eligibility rules. If the state has expanded their Medicaid plans under the Affordable Care Act, the young adult may be eligible.

### **How can a student get physical health care services even if they do not have health insurance?**

Pennsylvania Health Care Centers provide reduced costs for health services based on ability to pay. These health centers are federally qualified and must serve under-served populations and communities. A list can be found at <http://www.pachc.org/PA-Health-Centers> or by phone at 1-866-944-2273.

## **How can a student get family planning and reproductive health care services if they do not have health insurance?**

Planned Parenthood of Pennsylvania provides health services to men and women including general health, pregnancy related services, hormone therapy, STD testing, cancer screenings, and emergency contraceptives. A local Planned Parenthood in Pennsylvania can be found online at <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-center> or by phone 1-800-230-7526. Students can also go to [safeteens.org](http://safeteens.org) to find clinics and health care centers in their community.

## **TIPS TO HELP YOUTH WITH EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE MAXIMIZE COMMUNITY BASED RESOURCES**

- Find out if the post-secondary institution has a benefits hub. This can be helpful to ensure students have access to a variety of support for on-campus, state, and federal programs.
- Help youth do a monthly budget so that you can identify unmet need and assist them to apply for benefits.
- Help youth learn about the resources that are in the community where their college or program is located.
- If you are working with a youth who is food insecure, determine eligibility for SNAP and assist them with making the application.
- Help youth identify local food banks and pantries before they start the semester.
- Send youth care packages and consider developing a circle of adults who will send packages over the course of the year. Consider a combination of “treats,” encouraging messages, and basic needs.
- Help youth identify any basic needs that they may have that are not met through financial aid and whether there are benefits that they could apply for to meet those needs.
- Help youth apply for public benefits for which they may be eligible. This process can feel complicated and overwhelming for youth to pursue alone.
- Work with youth to ensure they have health insurance coverage through Medicaid if they are eligible.
- Help youth change their health insurance plan if they are moving to another part of the state or out of state for college.
- Help youth get connected with local health care providers before they start school.
  - Help them think through if they will need to plan for ongoing medication prescriptions and other regular treatment, such as counseling.
- Help youth identify local health care centers before they start school.
- Check in with youth throughout the school year and ask them about their health, including their behavioral health.

**Being proactive and persistent pays off! Even if you are mentor or service provider of a young person, think like a parent when you are checking in with youth. Ask them if they have eaten, are getting sleep, and how they feel. Ask often and when they say “fine,” ask again.**