



**A Home of Our Own:
Youth Recommendations to Reduce Homelessness for
Youth Aging Out of the Child Welfare System**





Youth Fostering Change is a youth engagement program of Juvenile Law Center. This program offers youth who are currently or formerly involved in the child welfare system the opportunity to evaluate the system and develop and implement a campaign that works to make the system better for other youth. For more information about Youth Fostering Change and our projects, visit us online at www.jlc.org/yfc.

2014-2015 Youth Fostering Change Youth Advocates:

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Cover Photo by Bern Anderson

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Introduction

Each year, **approximately 25,000 youth across the country age out of foster care without permanent family connections.**¹ Between one-third and one-fifth of these youth – thousands and thousands of young people – will become **homeless**, most within one year of exiting care.² An even greater number of youth will experience housing instability that isn't included in the official definition of homelessness, like couch surfing from house to house.

As older youth in care and youth who have aged out of care, we understand the problem of youth homelessness because of our personal experiences. We understand what it means to be a vulnerable and essentially “invisible” youth aging out of care into homelessness. Many of us have faced homelessness and housing instability, from sleeping on streets, shelters, and friends' couches, to living one paycheck away from eviction. Leaving the child welfare system without any realistic plan for housing and finances and no reliable adults who would support us, many of us have had to choose between pursuing our education or having a place to live; why should we have to make that choice? We understand how housing instability and homelessness can affect all parts of a youth's life, from employment to education, in turn, making us more susceptible to exploitation and violence.³

We are not talking about adults who have resources. We are talking about youth aging out into the world, alone.

- Briah

As Youth Advocates in Youth Fostering Change, we have identified **concrete strategies to reduce youth homelessness for youth aging out of care.** Our recommendations **include three main components: increasing permanency for older youth**, including supportive adults who are willing to serve as a resource after discharge from care; **early and comprehensive transition planning**; and **increased availability of supportive housing.** Some of our recommendations could be enacted right away by child welfare agencies.

The recommendations are a first step toward preventing youth from aging out of foster care into homelessness. In this process we hope to raise awareness about the complexities of “life after care” for youth leaving the system. We know that there is not a lot of data on the outcomes of youth after care and for homeless youth. States need to increase efforts to collect data on the outcomes of these youth to help identify, and end, youth homelessness.

Youth Leaving Care without Permanent Connections to Supportive Adults

In a perfect world, every foster youth will be placed in a stable, caring home that will remain a resource after the youth leaves care. Unfortunately, this type of placement is rare for older youth in care. It has been our experience that many foster parents are unprepared for the unique needs of older youth in foster care, or are unwilling to continue to provide support after youth age out of care and payments cease. Similarly, social workers, faced with high caseloads and limited placement options, often fail to ensure that youth placements are supportive and age-appropriate.

Although child welfare agencies try to find permanency for all youth in care, more work needs to be done to make sure older youth leave care with permanent, supportive connections to adults. When we leave care without these connections, we are at high risk of becoming homeless. A lot of us are not emotionally or financially prepared to be self-sufficient at 18, 19, 20, or 21. Without anyone to rely on when things get hard, we end up unstable or homeless.



Deionni

Between 15 and 17, I was in 11 different homes. During the two years of moving, my caseworkers didn't pay attention to where I wanted to be placed and kept trying to push me to live with my biological family. Because of the system's failure to provide me with a stable, committed placement, I will be on my own when I age out of care. When I leave care, I'll be stuck without any help or support.

Alyssa

Because I am in kinship care, my social worker assumes I am in a good placement, but I'm not. I am constantly being kicked out. When I get kicked out, I have no place to go. My social worker doesn't check on me, so I've never been given other housing options. I wish that she would actually communicate with me. I remain in the same placement and am still facing homelessness today. Now I'm about to turn 18 and have no plan.



Recommendations to Create Permanency for Older Youth:

- **Increase “Family” Finding and Include Youth throughout the Process:** Even though the law already requires family finding,⁴ it needs to be done better and more often, and older youth should be included in the process. Social workers should use “family” finding resources to identify biological family members *and* kin to be housing resources. Even if kin and family cannot provide housing or permanency through a placement, these relationships should be developed and supported. If this is done when youth are in care, they are more likely to leave care with a network of supportive adults, even if these adults are not willing to formally adopt the youth.
- **Recruit Resource Families for Older Youth in Care:** Child welfare agencies should recruit and license more foster parents who are stable and sensitive to the needs of older foster youth, and who are looking to provide permanency for youth in care (through adoption, permanent legal guardianship, or providing housing after the youth turns 21). Individuals recruited could serve as foster families and/or host homes for youth 18-21.⁵ The resource families should get special training in working with adolescents and young adults. With more resource families for older youth, especially trained resource families, youth are more likely to be connected to supportive adults who will help them even after they age out.

Because of the system’s failure to provide me with a stable, committed placement, I’ll be on my own when I age out of care.

- Deionni



Tevin

I had a positive experience as an older youth in care. My social worker helped me with resources for financial support and recommended therapy. She also encouraged a strong relationship with my biological grandmother. As a result, I felt secure in my home and did not fear being homeless.

- **Connect Youth with Mentors and Supportive Adults:** Youth need mentorship and tutoring while in care and upon discharge out of care. Youth should leave care with a network of supportive adults who can provide help, advice, and encouragement to the youth. Part of their transition plan should include identifying supportive adults, helping youth connect with supportive adults, and developing plans to sustain those relationships post-discharge.
- **Ensure that Youth are in Safe, Supportive, Age-Appropriate Placements:** Social workers should regularly visit and meet with youth to ensure that youth are in safe, supportive placements, including kinship, adoption, supervised independent living (SIL), group homes, residential treatment facilities, and foster care placements. Placements should foster normalcy for older youth, providing developmentally appropriate freedoms, responsibilities, and life skills to promote the youth’s development into a stable, independent adult. Special attention should be paid to the placements of LGBTQ youth and teen parents in care to ensure that they are in safe, supporting, accepting placements who embrace the youth for who they are.

When youth are in placements where they don’t feel safe and respected, they are more likely to choose to leave care before they are emotionally and financially prepared to live independently. Child welfare agencies have a lot of flexibility to create age-appropriate settings by providing “supervised setting in which an individual lives independently.”⁶ These settings can include: apartment living, host homes, dorm living, and the option for youth to be paid directly and manage their own expenses when appropriate.

My social worker doesn't check on me. I wish she would actually communicate with me about how my placement is.

- Alyssa

One tool for improving communication, collaboration, and goal-setting among older foster youth, foster parents, and social workers is the Teen Success Agreement developed by Youth Fostering Change (available at <http://www.jlc.org/yfc>).

Youth Leaving Care without a Comprehensive Transition Plan

Though laws already cover what should be in a transition plan,⁷ too often transition planning for youth leaving care does not start early enough, and often the plans do not provide a realistic path to successfully transition to independence. The transition plan is an essential bridge to adulthood and self-sufficiency for youth aging out of care. The transition plan should help prepare us to lead financially and emotionally stable lives by ensuring that we leave care with the skills, resources, and supports we need to be independent and successful. We should have clear, realistic plans for housing, employment and education. Too many of us leave care without realistic plans for where we will live or how we will support ourselves. A good plan should ensure that all youth are ready to transition to adulthood –but the plan will fail if it is not individualized to fit the youth’s needs, or if the plan does not exist at all.



Briah

During my time in care, I wanted to start planning where I wanted to go and ways to support myself after care a year before my discharge date, but I was always told not to worry about it because I was in college. We didn’t work on a transition plan until four months before discharge. I was discharged at age 21, and was terrified of being left homeless – so I went to programs looking for help, but was ultimately rejected because I was not considered homeless yet. Without an adequate transition plan, I had to seek housing and employment alone.

Ashley

I have constantly changed social workers, who never seemed interested in my transition priorities. I really didn’t talk about transition planning until I turned 17, and I was always out of the loop. I’ve had at least 4 social workers and they always listened to what the foster parents said and never asked what I actually wanted. They always made me feel like a little child. Now, as a foster youth still in care, I feel unprepared to age out, and I don’t know where I will live or work.



Recommendations to Improve Transition Planning:

Improving the Transition Planning Process

- **Begin Transition Planning Early:** To reduce the risk that a youth will end up homeless, a comprehensive transition plan should include a housing plan, plans for financial independence, and connections to supportive adults. Because these goals cannot be accomplished in just the three months before a youth leaves care, the transition planning process should begin by the time the youth turns 14 and continue until his/her discharge from care. Youth should be fully engaged and active in the transition process to make sure it is individualized, realistic, and achievable.
- **Train Social Workers to Specialize in Older Youth in Care:** Social workers need adequate time to develop transition plans for older youth and must know about available resources for older youth that will facilitate housing stability after leaving care. Social workers need to be comfortable engaging older youth in these difficult conversations, and should be trained in adolescent development and the specific needs of older foster youth, including diversity, gender identity, mental health, and trauma.

I believe that if older youth have a clear understanding of the discharge process for after care, it may help us to better understand "life after care."

- Tevin



Russell

When I was in care, my social worker really spoke up to make sure I had stable housing after care. She helped me develop and visualize a goal and plan, and a well thought out individualized education plan. I eventually was discharged back with my biological family, and when I left care it was hard to say goodbye to my social worker.

Improving the Transition Plan

- **Content of the Transition Plan:** To prevent homelessness, youth not only need a housing plan, but also plans for employment and services that promote success and stability. To prevent homelessness, the transition plan should, at a minimum, cover the following areas:
 - **Housing:** Youth leaving care need a realistic housing plan, which includes locating and applying for transitional housing opportunities and other housing options. Youth should also make back-up housing plans in case their main plan falls through.
 - **Financial Stability:** Youth entering care should be provided with a bank account where agencies regularly deposit money and which the youth can access when they leave care. The transition plan should include steps to help youth develop concrete job skills, including helping youth find a job while in care so that they are able to save their own finances for more than one year before discharge and connecting youth with outside agencies that provide training and referrals. Youth should be taught how to access benefits like Medicaid as “former foster youth,” SSI and SNAP.
 - **Mental Health Services:** If youth have untreated mental health needs, they will have a harder time maintaining stable housing. Before youth age out of care, they should be connected with therapeutic services that meet their mental health needs. When youth leave care, their transition team should develop a plan to ensure that these services will continue if needed.
 - **Key Documents:** Without key documents, youth will not be able to apply for jobs or housing. At discharge, youth should be provided with a packet prepared by the social worker containing their personal information, including birth certificates, social security cards, and medical cards.

Without an adequate transition plan, I had to seek housing and employment alone.

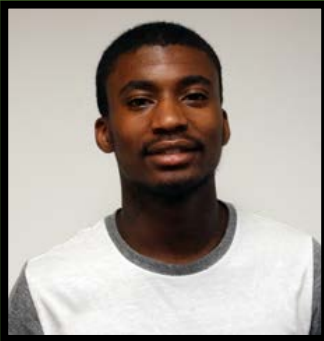
- Briah

There are many models for transition planning (for example, this one from Foster Club: https://www.fosterclub.com/files/transition_toolkit.pdf).

Lack of Supportive Housing Programs and Services for Youth Leaving Care

The most straightforward solution to homelessness is to provide youth aging out of care with a place to live. While some supportive housing services already exist for foster youth, there are not enough services for all youth transitioning out of care and there is not a sufficient range of options. Many former foster youth are excluded from supportive housing because of a lack of beds, funding, and rigid eligibility requirements, including age. While some of us are able to identify our own housing options as we are aging out of care, we still need a little extra financial support paying rent and bills for the first time. Providing more types of support (from help with security deposits to housing subsidies to more traditional supportive housing programs) would help meet the needs of more young adults who face many different challenges as they leave care.

In 2012, 36% of the country's young adults ages 18 to 31 – the so-called "millennial generation" – were living in their parents' home. As youth who have aged out of foster care, we don't have that choice.



Ronald

I have been in care since I was a baby. Despite living in care for nearly my entire life, I didn't receive any transitional planning before discharging from care on my 18th birthday. Almost immediately, I became homeless. I didn't have a bed to lay in at night, or know where my next meal would come from – I had no plan. Because I was homeless, I couldn't find a job and stopped attending school. I needed money and a place to live, so I became involved in selling drugs and eventually served time in jail.

Jasmine

I had no stable place to go when I discharged from care. I moved into housing through a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program, but had trouble meeting the eligibility criteria. Instead of helping me meet the requirements, they kicked me out of the program, and I became homeless. Without housing, the consequences are not just being deprived of being able to wash or eat. For me, my biggest consequence was not being able to continue going to college. Everything was harder with no place to go.



Recommendations to Increase Supportive Housing and Services:

- **Expand Supportive Housing for Youth Ages 18-25:** More supportive housing units are needed to meet the needs of 18-25 year olds transitioning out of care. Jurisdictions should increase the availability of supportive housing by establishing new programs or developing policies that have less rigid eligibility requirements for youth to receive supportive housing. These policies should meet the various needs of different youth, including youth with mental health needs, youth who may only need help with rent subsidies, or youth with children of their own. Existing programs should be expanded to provide more preventative and high quality services for youth in order to combat homelessness for youth transitioning out of care and for all youth.
- **Provide Rental Subsidies:** More rental subsidies should be made available to older youth in care and former foster youth to help youth pay for their rent and bills.
- **Extend Services to Youth Post-Discharge:** Youth who leave care at age 18, 19, 20, or 21 often are unable to become fully financially independent or afford housing. They are still developing job skills and pursuing their education. Because it may take several years after leaving care for youth to be truly independent, they should have access to aftercare or independent living services until age 25.

Instead of helping me meet the eligibility requirements, my Supervised Independent Living program kicked me out.

- Jasmine



Bern

Through my own research, I found a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) placement at a local organization. Although SIL offered me a place to live, the solution was temporary. When I turned 21, I was no longer eligible for the program. I became homeless because I didn't have a "Plan B." I began couch surfing, going from house to house. It was very uncomfortable. I hated feeling unwanted. I wanted my own space and I wanted to feel at home in my own house.

Conclusion

We hope our stories and recommendations help raise awareness about foster youth aging out of care into homelessness and help improve life outcomes for foster youth. Too many of us are falling through the cracks, as we are leaving care and continuing to need services that we are denied once we turn 21.

As past and current foster youth, we understand what it means to have little support and an unclear plan for independence after care. While we believe that positive changes have been made to the child welfare system, many changes still need to be implemented to truly protect youth once they leave care.

Specifically, for many of us who have experienced housing instability or homelessness, feelings of shame or fear prohibit us from seeking services. We hope now to use our personal stories and successes as a platform to further advocate for changes in the child welfare system and to empower other youth to speak up and seek help if they are experiencing homelessness.

Through these recommendations, we hope to guide states in understanding the importance of creating systems that track youth in the months and years after they leave care, to help assess the youth's needs for services and to combat this problem of youth aging out into homelessness. We hope that agencies and policy makers will hear our stories and use this as a resource and guide to ensure that other youth will not share our same negative experiences, and that all youth will have a safe place to call home. The number of youth aging out of care into homelessness is already too high, and we have the power to help youth find a safe, stable place to live.

#EndItNow

Endnotes

¹ "Aging Out," Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, <http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/about/aging-out>.

² Casey Family Programs. (1998). Northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA. p. 37; Columbia legal services, Promising Practices for Preventing Youth and Young Adult Homelessness, May 2014, <http://columbialegal.org/sites/default/files/14%200612%20CLS%20Promising%20Practices%20for%20Preventing%20Youth%20and%20Young%20Adult%20Homelessness.pdf>.

³ Dion, R., Dworsky, A., Kauff, J. & Klienman, R. (2014). Housing for youth aging out of foster care. U.S. department of housing and urban development, 1-12; The Porch light Project: Forever Family for Every Child, http://www.porchlightproject.org/youth09/aging_out_report.pdf.

⁴ 62 P.S. § 1302

⁵ This is possible under both Fostering Connections and the 2014 Pennsylvania OCYF ILS Bulletin., available at http://www.pccyfs.org/dpw_ocyfs/ILS/OCYF-3130-11-04Bulletin_Youth_IL_Svcs_Guidelines.pdf

⁶ 42 U.S.C.A. § 672 (c).

⁷ Since the enactment of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act in 2008, federal law requires that a transition plan be developed with a youth age 18 or older at least 90 days prior to discharge from the child welfare system. The plan must at least include specifics in several areas, including health, health insurance, housing, education, employment, mentoring, and support services. 42 U.S.C.A. § 675(5)(H). In Pennsylvania, the federal transition plan requirement is in the state law at 42 Pa. C.S.A. § 6352 (f)(8.2) and Juvenile Court Rule 1613.

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