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*In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.*

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## Supporting the Transition from Foster Care to Independence

The move from adolescence to adulthood is challenging. Although at this stage they are still developing, young people must master complex practicalities (housing, relationships, taxes, finances, health) while selecting and preparing for an occupation.

This is tough in the best of circumstances. When teens are in foster care, it can be even harder. The table at right shows this to be true.

North Carolina's child welfare practitioners are working to change this. To support them, this issue of *Practice Notes* shares tools that can help youth assess their readiness for independence, gives updates on NYTD and our state's extended foster care program, offers tips for teaching young adults to assume care of their medical needs, and more. ♦

### Outcomes for Young People Formerly in Foster Care Compared to the General Population of Young People

Outcome	Foster Care	General
No high school diploma or GED	24.4%	7.3%
Not employed	52%	24.5%
Average income from employment	\$12,064	\$20,349
Have health insurance	57%	78%
Males who have been arrested	81.2%	17.4%
Females who have been pregnant	77%	40.4%

Source: Courtney, et al., 2010  
cited in Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, n.d.

## Assessing Readiness to Transition Out of Foster Care

It can be hard to know how to best help youth in foster care prepare for independence. What skills are most important to emphasize? What areas are most vital for long-term success? The fact that every young person is different can make answering these questions challenging.

Fortunately, there are several tools available to help. Most are designed to be self-administered by youth, but can also be used in an interview format. These assessments can help young people identify the strengths they have to support their transition to adulthood. They can also be used to figure out where more support and skill practice may be needed before they exit foster care.

When self-assessments are retaken on a regular basis, they can show youth how their life skills have improved over time and

build a sense of self-efficacy. Most importantly, these tools can start and facilitate transition planning conversations between youth in care, the professionals working with them, and their resource parents.

### Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment

The NC Division of Social Services recommends the *Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment*, often called the "Casey Life Skills Assessment" or CLSA, as the preferred tool for assessing transition readiness (NC DSS, 2010). The CLSA is a free, web-based tool consisting of 113 questions divided into eight areas: Daily Living, Self-Care, Relationships and Communication, *continued next page*



## Assessing Readiness continued from previous page

Housing and Money Management, Work and Study, Career and Education Planning, Looking Forward, and Permanency. Responses are given on a 5-point scale from “No” to “Yes.”

The CLSA takes 30-40 minutes to complete, and is appropriate for youth in any living situation, which makes it a good fit for young adults participating in NC’s Foster Care 18-21 program. It’s also available in Spanish.

The CLSA was designed by self-sufficiency experts with input from focus groups of youth, caregivers, and child welfare staff (Nollan, 2000). Studies have shown it to have high reliability, meaning that the data the CLSA collects is consistent from person to person (Naccarato, et al., 2008). However, no formal studies have been conducted on the validity of the tool, meaning it has not been empirically shown to measure what it purports to measure.

This assessment is strengths-based. Because it measures skills in different domains, older youth tend to score higher than younger ones. This is to be expected, since people acquire more life skills as they age and have more opportunities to practice the skills required for independence.

Caregivers can also complete the CLSA on their own based on their knowledge of a young person. Differences in self-assessment results and the observations made by a caregiver can be instructional for case workers; using both perspectives may give more validity to the assessment.

### CLSA and Supporting Guides

- The [CLSA](https://bit.ly/2Jw9PBN) can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2Jw9PBN>
- The [Casey Life Skills Practice Guide](https://bit.ly/2HmzcFp) gives guidelines for administering the CLSA: <https://bit.ly/2HmzcFp>
- The [Resources to Inspire Guide](https://bit.ly/2GN1nMS) lists resources to help boost skills assessed by the CLSA: <https://bit.ly/2GN1nMS>

### Transition Readiness Scale 3.0

If you want to supplement the CLSA with a shorter, less formal self-assessment, you may want to try out a tool published by Independent Living Resources, Inc. Their *Transition Readiness Scale 3.0* (TRS 3.0) is a free tool “created by young adults for young adults,” and it aims to generate greater emotional investment in transition planning by youth (ILR, 2017).

The TRS 3.0 was developed in 2016 and updated in 2017 and 2018. It was developed by 33 young adults from four North Carolina counties. These individuals had either transitioned from foster care or were in the process of transitioning.

The TRS 3.0 uses easy-to-understand, non-clinical language that is meant to be relatable to young people. The scale is intended to be self-administered by young adults, either individually or in groups. ILR hopes this scale, written in the language of youth with lived experience of foster care, will encourage young adults to take a more active role in transition planning.

The TRS 3.0 is structured into 13 areas: Work Experiences, Educational and Vocational, Transportation, Social and Emotional Health, Illegal Behaviors, Physical and Mental Health, Housing, Interpersonal Skills, Connectedness, Financial Literacy, Money Man-

agement, Life Skills, and Parenting.

Overall skill level in each area is rated on a 5-point scale from “Crisis” to “Very Prepared.” Examples are included to describe what ratings may look like for each area. Brief, targeted suggestions for skill improvement are offered in a “Try This” box that corresponds to each rating.

The assessment takes 13-20 minutes to complete the first time, and less time thereafter. It’s recommended that youth re-take the assessment every six months to gauge their progress. Independent Living Resources is collecting data on results and usage, and welcomes feedback from those who have used the scale. (Please email feedback to [information@ilrinc.com](mailto:information@ilrinc.com).)

The TRS 3.0 can be found online here: <https://bit.ly/2I5ogws>

### Conclusion

Self-assessments can be used to individualize transition plans and skill development efforts, so youth are prepared when they transition out of foster care. Both the CLSA and the TRS 3.0 encourage young people to engage in dialogue with caregivers and case workers about their transition planning. This is a good thing, because assessments of transition readiness are most useful when young people actively participate and feel a sense of ownership in the process. ♦

### Related Resources

**FosterClub’s Transition Toolkit.** Recommended by Casey Family Programs (n.d.) and the Children’s Bureau (2013). Provides youth with a roadmap for thinking about building life skills and preparing to leave care, with a planning worksheet for each skill area. Free to download and print in black and white, or full-color booklets can be ordered. <https://bit.ly/2GTuzpr>

**Permanency Pact.** Another free tool by FosterClub. <https://bit.ly/2qtqSMd>

**Financial Empowerment Toolkit.** Created by the National Resource Center for Youth Development for use by case workers, foster parents, and other supportive adults. <https://www.nrcys.ou.edu/images/yd-pubs/ftk14edc508.pdf>

**Additional Casey Assessments.** For other populations in foster care (e.g., youth who are pregnant/parenting, LGBTQ, American Indian, homeless, etc.), these assessments are meant to be offered in conjunction with the CLSA to help workers get a more complete understanding of a youth’s skills and transition readiness. <https://bit.ly/2IPjpyC>

## NC's Foster Care 18-21 Program: Benefits and Lessons Learned

North Carolina launched Foster Care 18-21 in January 2017. This program is an exciting leap forward, because it strengthens our ability to support young adults as they transition from foster care to independent adulthood.

Many people struggle with this transition, not just those in foster care. If you doubt this, consider: in 2016, one in three Americans ages 25-29 lived with their parents or grandparents—the highest in 75 years (Kopf, 2018).

Though welcome, the Foster Care 18-21 program is also a big shift. As this article explains, it brings with it not only benefits for young people, but learning opportunities for child welfare workers and their agencies.

### The Program

Thanks to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, states can now claim federal reimbursement for foster care maintenance payments made on behalf of Title IV-E-eligible youth until they reach age 21. At least half of all states have extended care past age 18 (USDHHS, 2017).

North Carolina does this using Foster Care 18-21. Youth can enter this program by signing a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA). Program services and benefits include Medicaid coverage, educational grants/scholarships for attending a NC public community college or university, and:

**Ongoing Case Work** that includes a Transitional Living Plan, which is created and reviewed at quarterly case review meetings with the young adult's Transition Support Team; monthly contact between the young adult and social worker; quarterly home assessments (unless the young adult lives in a dorm); and assistance obtaining annual credit checks.

**Placement** in a home approved by the county child welfare agency. The placement does not have to be a licensed foster home. It can be in a college/university dormitory, or

an approved semi-supervised housing arrangement with a roommate or a relative with the county providing supervision and oversight to the young adult. The only living situations that make young adults ineligible for the program are being incarcerated or living with the person DSS removed them from.

**Foster care payments** at the standard rate (currently \$634/month). These are for food, shelter, clothing, personal incidentals, and ordinary and necessary school and transportation expenses. Payments may be made to a foster parent, placement agency, relative, or host family. The county may even make the payments directly to the young adult if (1) it determines this is in the young adult's best interests, (2) financial management is a goal on the Transitional Living Plan, and (3) the county works closely with the young adult on budgeting.

Program participants can also continue to access services from LINKS.

### Entering & Exiting the Program

Youth who turn 18 while in DSS custody must meet one of the criteria shown in the figure below to enroll. Once enrolled, young adults must maintain their eligibility by meeting at least one of the eligibility criteria.

Participants graduate the program when they turn 21. Young adults can also leave the program at any time.

As long as they are eligible, those who leave can rejoin it at any time. However, young adults can be terminated from the program if they violate their agreement with the county or are not engaging in the required meetings or are not making progress on the Transitional Living Plan. Counties must seek court review prior to terminating program services.



If they become ineligible, young adults have 60 days to become eligible again, as long as they actively seek to renew their eligibility. Otherwise, DSS will seek termination for break in eligibility.

For further details about eligibility and other aspects of the program, please refer to North Carolina policy (<https://bit.ly/2qEdB4a>).

### Benefits

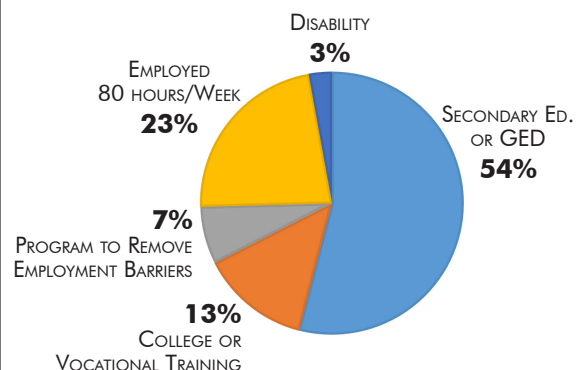
We do not yet have research findings specific to NC's Foster Care 18-21 program. However, studies from other parts of the country show that youth who remain in care past 18 are much more likely than their peers who exit foster care to have a positive housing, employment, and education status (Netzel & Tardanico, 2014).

In California, one of the first states to implement extended foster care, researchers interviewed 611 youth in care at age 16-17 and again at age 19. The vast majority felt extended care supported them in their life goals and most felt positively about the assistance they received.

This same study found *continued p. 4*

### How Foster Care 18-21 Participants Qualify for the Program

Jan. 31, 2018 (n=535)



## NC's Foster Care 18-21 Program continued from previous page

that remaining in care was associated with a wide range of positive outcomes. "Young people still in care were more likely than those who had left care to be enrolled in school, reported having more social support, and had received more supportive services. They were less likely than those who had left care to experience economic hardships, food insecurity, homelessness, psychiatric hospitalization, and criminal justice system involvement."

Though these findings should be regarded with some caution since they do not take into account preexisting differences between youth who remained in care and those who left, they nevertheless provide emerging evidence of the potential benefits of extended foster care (Courtney, et al., 2016a).

### Agency Lessons Learned

Despite the benefits, extending foster care to age 21 is a shift that has required some learning on agencies' part. As noted by Erin Baluyot, coordinator of the Foster Care 18-21 program for the NC Division of Social Services, providing care and supervision to adults is different.

"With minors, it's not unusual for workers to have a 'safety' mindset, with lots of focus on protocol and structure," Baluyot says. "But we want young adults to be successful and independent, so we need to let go of the reins a little bit."

Youth don't have to be in this program. For this reason, Baluyot advises workers to focus more on connection, support, and independent living. "We'd rather be involved in their lives with a less than perfect living arrangement, than not involved at all."

Thus, when assessing a living arrangement for the program, the threshold of acceptability is much lower than for a minor in care. Baluyot suggests we should be looking at the bare minimum of appropriateness—running water, functional bathroom,

### A Success Story

Sierra, from Johnston County, will graduate in the fall with a bachelor's degree in cellular molecular biology, with plans to continue for her masters and PhD. She has also worked to earn money since she was in 11th grade. The support she receives through the Foster Care 18-21 program has allowed her to take a break from work this semester to focus on her studies as they become more intense during her senior year. Not only has she gotten college and associated costs paid for through NC Reach, LINKS, CFNC, Foster Care 18-21, and scholarships, but she will be graduating in two and a half years.

Sierra says the Foster Care 18-21 program gives her a sense of security. She can concentrate on school and doesn't have to worry about having money for her car payment, insurance, or where her next meal will come from. "Foster kids want to change," Sierra says, "but they do not know how." In her experience, Foster Care 18-21 is helping open the door to her future.




PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

a place to prepare meals, a bed and place to store belongings. We want to maximize the young adult's autonomy to choose where and with whom to live. Avoid asking roommates for SSNs to run background checks, as this may compromise the young adult being able to live there.

Counties have also passed on advice to Baluyot concerning the following:

**1. Finding placements.** If youth have a hard time finding a living arrangement, Kelly Davis, LINKS Coordinator in Johnston County, suggests reaching out to churches or community organizations known to host exchange students.

**2. Out-of-state placements.** Young adults can choose to live out of state. Unfortunately, many states do not provide services for youth 18 years and older through ICPC. To overcome this hurdle, be creative in how you provide support and assess safety. As always, good communication is key.

**3. Volunteering** does make young adults eligible for the program. However, some counties are struggling to have this recognized by the courts, since this differs from CARS requirements. Partnering with your agency attorney to educate judges about this program is one possible solution to this barrier.

**4. Revolving door.** Most young adults can move back in with their

parents if a job, college, or relationship does not work out. This program attempts to create a similar safety net by giving young adults in foster care the ability to re-enroll in the program as many times as needed. However, some young adults have bounced in and out of the program frequently. If you encounter this, work with the Transition Support Team to better engage the young adult.

**5. Look for positive signs.** Johnston County's Kelly Davis says she has seen young adults stretching themselves in exciting ways. For instance, there's been "healthy competition" between youth to see who can save enough to buy a car first. Exits and returns to the program are often a sign the program is working as intended. In the California study mentioned above, one in five of youth interviewed had left care but had chosen to return by age 19 (Courtney, et al., 2016a).

**6. Truly involve young adults.** This program extends support for just a few years. Make the most of this time by genuinely engaging young adults. As one put it, "Listening to professionals talk about your life and your future is like being hungry and not being allowed to decide whether or not to eat." If we really want to prepare young adults for the future, we owe it to them to treat them as partners. ♦



# Reflections on Promoting Independence

## An Interview with Resource Parents Tony and Wanda Douglas

Youth in foster care face a unique set of challenges as they transition to adulthood. To learn more about what it takes to support youth during this critical time, *Practice Notes* spoke with Tony and Wanda Douglas, veteran North Carolina foster parents who excel at promoting independence in youth in care. The Douglasses have been foster parents for 17 years. During that time, they fostered over 100 children and adopted four. They also train foster parents on helping youth reach self-sufficiency.

### What do agencies and social workers need to know about youth who are transitioning to adulthood?

We need to recognize that their first priority is to get out of the system. The only thing they want is their freedom, which to them means not having anyone tell them what to do. They don't understand the responsibilities associated with their freedom. Many youth end up homeless or in jail within 24 months of exiting care.

The first 12 to 18 months after they leave care is about **survival**. They need income now so they can achieve stability. Once they have that, they'll be able to focus on long-term goals such as going to college, learning a trade, etc.

Youth have skills, but they might be hidden. Find out what they are really interested in and explore how they can use this to earn income. Think outside the box. What can they do *right now*, with what they have, to pay their rent and meet their concrete needs?

We cared for a youth who enjoyed doing hair and makeup. She created a YouTube channel and made money doing video tutorials!

### What are the main skills youth need as they transition to adulthood?

First, they've got to have tangible skills. They need to know how to find housing, manage their money, and find and maintain employment. They also need to be able to make the right decisions, communicate well with others, and handle peer pressure.

Youth in foster care really struggle with decision-making. Adults have made most of their decisions for their entire lives. We have to prepare them to make decisions that will increase their likelihood of success.

### What are some of your "lessons learned" from working with youth as they transition to adulthood?

We have to let them become young adults. They don't want to be treated like a child. Step back and give them freedom to grow and make choices for themselves. They need to practice making decisions in a safe, supportive place and to deal with the natural consequences. This is what North Carolina's Foster Care 18-21 program is for.

Normalize that they will make mistakes, and that this is okay. Ultimately, this process helps them learn, grow, and become more independent.

Another big lesson learned to keep in mind is, just because they are 18 doesn't mean they are ready for adulthood. We all mature at different ages. Meet young people where they are. If we push them into adulthood too soon, we set them up to fail. ♦



Wanda Douglas

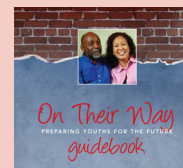
### Tips for Cultivating Independent Living Skills

- Do a strengths and needs assessment with the youth. (For more on this, see the article on page 1.) Follow up with an individualized, developmentally appropriate plan to help them become successful. Obtain and use the youth's input throughout this process. Getting their buy-in and ownership is essential.
- Focus on concrete, practical skills—does the youth know how to budget, save money, shop from a list, go to the doctor, search and apply for jobs and housing, pay rent, etc.? Help youth develop and practice these skills before they enter the real world.
- Encourage youth to open bank accounts and save money. For example, with their agreement, set up an arrangement where they pay \$100 a month in "rent" to foster parents, with the understanding that youth will get that money back once they find an apartment and have to pay a deposit.
- Help youth obtain documents they will need (state ID, driver's license, Social Security card, original birth certificate, etc.). Make digital copies.
- Ensure the youth has a support system in place (formal and informal) before they exit care.
- Start preparing youth early—long before age 18!

Sources: Courtney, et al., 2016a, 2016b; Pecora, et al., 2003

### On Their Way

**On Their Way** is an instructional video and guidebook that show caregivers what they can do on a daily basis



to help guide youth of any age to plan for their educational and career goals. The guidebook provides discussion points for meals, family activities, and advanced understanding of adolescent development. The curriculum takes caregivers through eight topics: education, career interests, decision making, finances, getting help, staying healthy, housing, and staying connected. It is available free through the on-demand courses page of [fosteringNC.org](http://fosteringNC.org), the NC Division of Social Services' learning portal for resource parents.

## Preparing Transitioning Youth to Look After Their Own Medical Needs

In our efforts to support youth in foster care in their transition to independent adulthood, their health and health care deserve special attention. Experience and research tell us that many of these youth have a hard time accessing and managing their medical care (Courtney, et al., 2001, 2016a; Reilly, 2003; Rosenbach, 2001).

This is a problem, because foster youth are three to seven times more likely than their peers to have chronic health conditions such as diabetes or asthma (Jaudes, 2012). In fact, in 2014, nearly 72% of youth in foster care age 18-21 had at least one chronic condition (NC Pediatric Society, 2016). Transitioning youth need our support to meet their medical needs.

### How You Can Help

The following suggestions for preparing youth to assume care of their medical needs come from a review of the research and a conversation with Kern Eason, Pediatric Program Manager at Community Care of North Carolina (CCNC), and Christy Street, Project Director of the NC Pediatric Society's Fostering Health project.

#### Highlight health care's importance.

Youth this age tend to feel invincible, so they may not see the need to focus on their health (Jaudes, 2012). Outline the importance of preventive medical care, regular check-ups, dental and vision care, healthy eating, and exercise.

#### Emphasize mental health, too.

Youth in foster care have higher levels of emotional distress that can have a significant impact on their mental and physical health (Felitti et al., 1998; Jaudes, 2012). Unfortunately, many youth do not continue mental health services once they exit care. Underscore the importance of continuing counseling and medication management (Courtney, et al., 2001; Reilly, 2003).

#### Make sure they know their rights.

Youth aging out of care can qualify for Child and Family Medicaid until age

26, regardless of their income. This gives them higher levels of coverage than others their age typically have. Youth adopted before age 18 may qualify for Health Choice benefits, or they can be on their parents' medical coverage until age 26.

#### Teach them about the difference between pediatric and adult care.

For example, adults must decide who will be on their medical team (e.g., parents/caregivers) and they must advocate for themselves with health professionals. In addition, adults' appointments with physicians are often shorter. Young adults with chronic conditions (e.g., sickle cell anemia) may have to manage relationships and appointments with both specialists and their primary care doctor.

**Help them navigate logistics.** The application and enrollment process for Medicaid is complicated and must begin before youth leave care. Connect youth with an eligibility worker

and inform the worker of the youth's foster care status, so they get the right type of coverage. Help youth complete the application and obtain the necessary documentation.

Youth also need to know when their pediatrician will stop treating them, so they can find an adult provider well in advance. Link youth to a CCNC care coordinator so they will have more support overcoming barriers to care (NC Pediatric Society, 2016; Jaudes, 2012; Rosenbach, 2001).

**Start preparing youth for the transition at age 14 or 15.** Give youth increasing levels of responsibility for scheduling appointments, obtaining prescription refills, researching their conditions/medications, etc.

#### Share information with youth about their family's medical history.

Knowing their family medical history and being able to accurately report this to medical providers is a key part of preventive care. ♦

### Resources for Workers and Youth

- Fostering Health NC. This NC Pediatric Society project features an online resource library with tools for maximizing partnerships between DSS, primary care providers, and CCNC. <https://bit.ly/2CFUdeu>
- Transition Quickguide. This guide seeks to help youth and young adults gain self-care and decision-making skills to take charge of planning and managing their own health and career goals. <https://bit.ly/2GI1jxl>
- American Academy of Pediatrics Transition Guide. This accessible 5-page guide clearly outlines steps youth must take to assume responsibility for their health as they transition to independence. <https://bit.ly/2IEkvpg>
- Pen & Paper Self-Assessment. Created by Got Transition ([www.gottransition.org](http://www.gottransition.org)), this is a tool youth can use to determine their readiness to manage their health needs. <https://bit.ly/2Jvfvo>
- Online Quiz. This is similar to the tool above, but in online quiz format. <https://bit.ly/2qf2tdN>
- TeensHealth. This website offers health-related information for youth and their caregivers. <https://teenshealth.org/en/teens/>
- Fostering Connections I and II. These 30-minute, self-paced online courses provide knowledge and tools for collaborating successfully with medical homes and CCNC to improve outcomes for children. Available to NC county child welfare professionals via [www.ncswLearn.org](http://www.ncswLearn.org).



## Removing Barriers to Driving for Youth in Foster Care

Being able to drive is a necessity for most people in our society. Yet in the past, teens in foster care have faced delays learning to drive or obtaining a driver's license. This was a problem. Not having a license can be a barrier to accessing education, health care, employment, and other important developmental activities. For youth in foster care, driving is not just a privilege, but a route to independence.

North Carolina recognizes this and is taking steps to remove barriers to driving for youth in foster care.

### TRIP

In 2017, North Carolina Session Law 2017-41 directed the NC Division of Social Services to create a two-year pilot project to help youth in foster care obtain learner's permits and driver's licenses. In response, in collaboration with county child welfare agencies, former foster youth, family partners, and other stakeholders, the Division created **Transportation Really Is Possible (TRIP)**, a pilot project

that launched on Dec. 1, 2017.

TRIP provides funding, on a first-come, first-served basis, to support young people and their caregivers with expenses associated with youth obtaining a driver's license or learner's permit, including insurance, fees, and other costs.

The program also provides tools to ensure decisions about pursuing a driver's license are appropriate and well considered. For example, county child welfare agencies, youth, and caregivers are required to jointly complete a TRIP Readiness Assessment. This assessment facilitates discussion about safety issues related to medical, mental health, or emotional conditions, substance use, and other areas that may impact a young person's judgment and safety behind the wheel. This tool is used to facilitate a conversation about a young person's readiness to drive and jointly plan to address any barriers.

In addition to this readiness assessment, in December 2017 the Division of Social Services issued the following resources to help county child welfare

agencies implement this program:

- Announcement Letter
- Program Criteria
- Reimbursement Request Form
- Youth-Caregiver-Agency Agreement Template
- TRIP Eligibility and Reimbursement At-a-Glance

These resources can be found here: <http://bit.ly/2omw3Nw>.

### Limited Funds

With TRIP, county child welfare agencies reimburse eligible youth and caregivers for qualified TRIP expenses. Counties may then seek reimbursement from the NC Division of Social Services for these costs. However, reimbursement of counties will be provided on a first-come, first-served basis. Funding for this two-year pilot program totals \$75,000 for each year (i.e., \$75,000 for SFY 2017-18 and \$75,000 for SFY 2018-19). Given the level of demand among young people, it is anticipated that these funds will be expended quickly each fiscal year. The Division will notify counties regularly of the status of TRIP funding to help them plan accordingly. ♦

### TRIP Eligibility Criteria At-a-Glance

#### Youth / Young Adults

1. Must either (1) be at least 14 ½ years old but not yet 18 and in foster care as defined in G.S. 131D-10.2(9); OR (2) have been in foster care on their 18th birthday and have a VPA to participate in Foster Care 18 to 21.
2. Must have approval from the caregiver OR county child welfare agency.
3. Must have contacted the county child welfare agency, as needed, to obtain any other approval or information needed to attend driver's education or get a learner's permit or driver's license and must have consulted the county and caregiver about their readiness to drive.
4. Must have at least one goal on their Transitional Living Plan (DSS-5096a) that specifies the TRIP-relevant steps they must take (e.g., enroll in and complete driver's education).
5. Must have a written agreement with their caregiver and county that describes:
  - Their plan to contribute toward ongoing costs associated with driving that are not or will not be covered by TRIP or LINKS;
  - Any educational criteria needed, such as budgeting and understanding insurance; and,
  - The caregiver's agreement to support the young person in obtaining driving experience.

#### Caregivers

1. Must care for a TRIP-eligible youth or young adult.
2. Must have applied the reasonable and prudent parent standard when deciding whether to grant approval to the young person to attend driver's education or obtain a learner's permit or driver's license.
3. Must have contacted the county child welfare agency, as needed, to obtain any other approval or information needed for the young person to attend driver's education or get a learner's permit or driver's license and must have consulted the county about the young person's readiness to drive.
4. Must have a written agreement with the young person and the county that addresses the points outlined under item 5 at left under the youth/young adult eligibility criteria.

## Promoting College Success for Youth in Foster Care

Many teens and young adults in the U.S. want to attend college. This is true for youth in foster care, too. While all youth must overcome challenges to achieve a college degree, youth in care face additional barriers.

Higher education outcomes for youth in foster care are far worse than for the general population. On average, only 20% of college-qualified youth in foster care attend college, compared with 60% of their non-foster care peers. Only 4% of youth in foster care graduate from college, compared to 24% of the general population (Courtney, 2011; Kirk, 2010; Salazar, 2013).

To do better by youth in foster care, we must act on what we know about the preparation and support they need to succeed in college.

### Supporting Academic Readiness

Foster care alumni are often at a disadvantage academically. On average, they have lower high school GPAs than the general population of college-age students. They also tend to have fewer academic skills, such as study, time management, and problem solving skills (Salazar, 2013). Among youth in foster care who drop out of college, 26% report the work was too challenging (Courtney, 2011). Given that academic preparation for college happens **prior** to college admission, it is important to focus on the academic needs of youth in foster care much earlier in their education.

Minimizing school moves is key. Youth lose on average 4-6 months of educational progress each time they change schools (McNaught, 2009). If school moves occur, child welfare workers need to collaborate closely with schools to ensure the school provides opportunities for the child to catch up to their grade level.

In addition, teachers and administrators often underestimate the abilities of students in foster care and have lower expectations for their achieve-

### Advice from a Foster Care Alumna

*An interview with Megan Holmes, BSW*

**When did you first start thinking about college?**

In some ways, school was my way of escaping what was going on at home. I started thinking of college around sophomore year in high school. I knew I wanted better for myself than what I had at the time, and I felt college would help me get that. Also, my godmother was always very supportive of me excelling academically.

**What's helped you most in pursuing higher education?**

I have a very strong faith and a supportive church community. The pastor and members of my church have been very encouraging. SaySo has been incredibly helpful and supportive, too, as have NC Reach and ETV. I couldn't have gotten through college without these supports!

**What have been some of the biggest challenges?**

Finding emotional support. College is when you learn how to move beyond what happened to you and become who you are. You need support to work through that. Don't be afraid to ask for help! A lot of youth who have been in foster care have trouble asking for help.

Student counseling services wasn't very helpful. They didn't understand my specific situation. I had to find other connections by getting involved in things outside of class. I was president of the gospel choir and I became close with the advisor to the choir. She was incredibly supportive and is still a resource to me.

Housing instability was also a huge challenge. Aging out of foster care at 21 was hard. When I was aging out, I was working two jobs and had to take an overload class schedule (18 hours). Thankfully, I lived on campus then, or I fear I wouldn't have had a place to live. Youth need to be prepared in advance for this transition and have plans to make sure they can continue on in school.

**How can child welfare workers help?**

- Be more available. Sometimes workers are so busy they can't be as available as they want, but it is so important for youth to feel you want them to succeed and you can help them to accomplish their goals. Go with youth to visit colleges. Help them explore options.
- Be encouraging. Don't assume college isn't something youth want or can do.
- Actively prepare youth. Help plan the transition to college and what will happen when the youth ages out. Plan ahead: don't wait until the last minute!
- Share information about resources. I have found a lot of workers don't know about NC Reach or ETV, or else they are just not telling youth about these options. Make sure youth know what resources are available.



ment (Benner, 2007). Research has consistently demonstrated a relationship between low teacher expectations and poor educational outcomes. Child welfare workers should advocate for youth who want to attend college to ensure they are getting both the academic rigor and skills they need.

### Campus-Based Social Support

Social support during college is also key. Social support helps students navigate the many challenges related

to attending and completing college. However, due to placement in out-of-home care and placement disruptions, youth in care are less likely to have social supports. In addition, it can be more challenging for youth in care to reach out for support while in college due to feeling stereotyped or stigmatized by those who don't understand their experiences (Salazar, 2013).

To address these concerns, many colleges and universities

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## Promoting College Success continued from previous page

are developing programs to help youth in foster care entering college to develop and maintain support networks. “Early start” programs bring these youth to campus during the summer and provide free room and board, peer mentors, social activities and classes to help ease the transition to college (Geiger, 2017).

Homebase, a college ministry on the campus of Western Carolina University, is another example. This facility, a partnership between WCU and Baptist Children’s Home, focuses on the needs of foster care alumni. This program is led by a former pastor and a licensed therapeutic foster parent.

Programs like these build support networks and connect youth in care to others who understand their experiences. Research shows support networks are a factor in college retention, academic success, and other positive student outcomes (Geiger, 2017).

### Mental Health Support

Many youth in foster care have a history of trauma and higher rates of mental health diagnoses than the general population (Courtney, 2011). Of young adults exiting foster care, 54% have at least one mental health diagnosis. One in four have PTSD, a condition that increases students’ risk of disengaging from college (Salazar, 2013).

Being on their own for the first time and experiencing the normal stressors of college life can trigger a recurrence of mental health symptoms. Even if youth received mental health treatment while in care, many lose access to therapists when in college (Dworsky, 2010). While campus health programs offer counseling, typically these services are not focused on the specific needs of youth in foster care. Lack of access to providers and inadequate health care coverage can also be challenges for foster care alumni in college (Salazar, 2013).

## NC Reach and ETV

**NC Reach** is a state-funded scholarship offered to qualified applicants for up to 4 years of undergraduate study at NC public colleges and universities. Funding is awarded after other public funds and scholarships have been applied. NC Reach provides comprehensive student support, including mentors, care packages, and internships. For eligibility and other information about NC Reach, visit <http://www.ncreach.org/>.

**ETV.** The North Carolina Education & Training Voucher Program (ETV) is a federally-funded, state-administered program for youth who were in U.S. foster care. Students may receive up to \$5,000 a year for qualified school related expenses. Funding is limited and available on a first-come, first-serve basis to eligible students. Applicants must complete the ETV application, which includes confirmation from the school each semester of the student’s enrollment, the cost of attendance, and their unmet need. For eligibility and other information about ETV in North Carolina, visit <http://www.fc2sprograms.org/north-carolina/>.

Child welfare workers can help support youth in foster care in the transition to college by researching available mental health options and working to link current treatment providers to new ones. In addition, youth need to learn about health insurance options before they age out of care.

### Financial Support

Financial challenges are one of the most commonly cited reasons for not completing a college degree. Because many youth in care have no financial safety net, they need to be prepared in advance for financial obstacles common among young adults. Youth in foster care who have not successfully completed college cite needing to work multiple jobs, not being able to secure year-round housing, not receiving adequate financial aid, and not having access to transportation as examples of the financial barriers they face (Salazar, 2013; Courtney, 2011; Davis, 2006).

Recent federal policy has acknowledged the need to support youth in foster care in attending college, and programs have been developed to provide access to financial resources and additional supports. In North Carolina these programs are NC Reach and ETV (see box above).

### Practice Implications

Although youth in foster care face many challenges, there are specific services and supports we can put in place to make it easier for them to attend and graduate from college. Specific steps child welfare professionals and their agencies can take include the following:

- Increase academic stability by preventing school moves.
- Encourage youth to attend college.
- Ensure youth to have access to college preparatory classes and are learning other academic success skills in high school.
- Focus on support networks; make sure youth know what is available at the college they attend.
- Find out if there are special programs or services specifically for youth in foster care to help them transition to college.
- Act as a liaison to mental health providers and help the youth research available mental health supports while in college.
- Educate youth about NC Reach and ETV; help them apply. ♦

## NYTD and the Success of Transitioning Youth

The National Youth in Transition Database, or NYTD, has a big impact on the success of transitioning youth. Curious about how a database can make such a difference to foster care alumni and youth in care? The answer has to do with two things: funding and measuring outcomes.

### The Link to LINKS

NYTD came into being because of Public Law 106-169, a 1999 federal statute that established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). This program provides states with flexible funding for programs to help youth make the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency. CFCIP funds are what's behind independent living services across the country; in North Carolina, they support LINKS programming.

When it created the CFCIP, Congress also required the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to develop a system for collecting data on independent living programs so we can understand how states use CFCIP funds and what services are effective. NYTD is this data collection effort.

### Data Collection

With NYTD, every state must engage in two data collection activities:

1. They must collect information on youth and the independent living services they receive that are paid for or provided by CFCIP funds.
2. States must also collect outcome information on youth in foster care at age 17 and must follow these youth over time to collect additional outcome information at ages 19 and 21. The **NYTD survey** used at these ages asks youth how they are doing regarding finances, housing, health, education, and more.

States began collecting NYTD data in 2010 and are required to report data to ACF every six months. A state's NYTD submissions are evaluated based on several factors, including

the extent to which the data are error-free and whether enough youth participate in NYTD surveys.

North Carolina has a strong track record when it comes to NYTD reporting, thanks to ongoing efforts by county LINKS coordinators, foster care workers, and others to recruit and support youth and foster care alumni in completing NYTD surveys.

### The NYTD Review

To ensure NYTD is implemented correctly, ACF has developed the NYTD Review. Similar to the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), the NYTD Review is a means of comprehensively evaluating a state's policies and practices related to collecting and reporting timely, reliable, and accurate data on youth in transition. Just as states create a program improvement plan (PIP) after the CFSR, states found to be out of compliance on the NYTD Review must complete and monitor a NYTD improvement plan.

North Carolina's first NYTD Review will likely occur in 2019. For more on NYTD Reviews, see ACF's *NYTD Review Guide* (<http://bit.ly/2lclVz>).

### What's at Stake

NYTD affects the success of youth in transition in part because it is tied to funding. Federal law requires ACF to impose a penalty of between one and five percent of the state's annual CFCIP allotment on any state that fails to comply with reporting requirements.

Partial loss of CFCIP funds could potentially weaken a state's ability to serve transitioning youth. In federal fiscal year 2018, North Carolina expects to receive and spend \$3.1 million in CFCIP funds to serve approximately 5,580 young people.

This funding source may be more important to North Carolina today than ever. Our state recently increased the support it provides to youth in care through the creation of the Foster Care 18 to 21 Program. This program is likely to boost the number



Getting youth to complete NYTD surveys is tied directly to the federal funding our state receives for LINKS programming.

of youth counting on and benefiting from CFCIP funds, as more opt to remain in care to take advantage of the resources this program provides to help them attain self-sufficiency.

Yet NYTD's importance is about more than funding. It also provides a new source of data with the potential to help us understand which independent living programs and services are most helpful. Informed by NYTD data, agencies may be able to develop new or adjust existing services to be more effective and efficient.

This is a priority in North Carolina. Erin Conner, statewide coordinator of our state's LINKS program, notes that the Division of Social Services recently added a team focused on analysis of child welfare data. Conner says she is committed to working with this new team and with county child welfare agencies to understand and spread the word about which LINKS services and programs produce the best results.

### Resources for Learning More

- **Video Series.** The U.S. Children's Bureau recently released a six-part video series about NYTD and the NYTD Review. These short, animated videos are a valuable resource to educate youth, families, and others about NYTD. They are available at <http://bit.ly/2oJmuYo>.
- **NYTD Data Briefs.** To read short reports summarizing findings from national NYTD data, visit <http://bit.ly/2FyekNb>. ♦

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