



Supporting Foster Care Youth on the Way to Adulthood

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“Being in the system they’ll . . . teach you how to go to work, they’ll try to teach you how to go to school, how to do hygiene. But they don’t never teach you how to really grow up and deal with what you’ve been through so you don’t just crack up somewhere.”

--Becky, 25-year-old with foster care background²

As Illinois’s child welfare system has improved from one of the worst in the nation to one of the best, there is a growing awareness that many older youth emerging from the system between the ages of 18 and 21 are not well equipped to live independently.

What All Young Adults Need

For all youth in the United States the transition to adulthood has become increasingly complex and extended. It is not uncommon for young adults in their 20s to return home as they attend school, travel, make and break love relationships, choose a career and find their way in the world of work. Parents are expected to be “on call” to provide emotional and financial support much longer than in previous generations. Young people who are living “independently” may still rely on parental advice and financial support. On average, parents give their children an estimated \$38,000 — about \$2,200 a year — between the ages of 18 and 34 to pay for such expenses as college tuition, car payments and housing costs.¹ While this financial support for the next generation is crucial, the young adult may value a parent’s emotional support even more. Often, the parent is only a phone call away when the young person wants to share experiences and feelings, whether its insecurity in a new city, conflict with a supervisor or elation upon a significant accomplishment.

Youth aging out of the child welfare system need this type of “parental” support even more than those growing up in intact families; yet, they are expected to make it on their own long before their peers and with far fewer resources. While most young people can experiment with adult responsibilities and return home for a break if things don’t work out, former foster youth who try and fail at independence may find themselves homeless, out of work and school and with hardly a dollar in their pocket.

Status of Foster Youth in Illinois



Illinois has made tremendous progress in its child welfare system over the past decade. The number of children in the system has been reduced dramatically, from a high of over 50,000 in 1997 to under 17,000 in 2006. There is, however, growing awareness that many teenagers and young adults in state care are poorly served and ill equipped to transition successfully to adulthood. Of 16,736 wards of the state in 2006, a large proportion—24.4 percent (4,084)—was age 15 or older and another 14.8 percent (2,477) was age 12 to 14.³

Illinois youth who are in foster care on their 18th birthday may stay in care until they are age 21, regardless of their income or educational status. On December 31, 2008, there were almost 2,500 young people between 18 and 21-years-old in state care.

Whether or not a youth remains in or leaves foster care after age 18 depends to a large extent on where he or she lives. In Cook County, the guardian ad litem petitions for youth to stay in care to age 21, and the judges tend to agree; in other counties, youth rarely have such advocacy and are more likely to leave the system at age 18. For instance, for youth who were 17-years-old and in care on January 1, 2005, 71% of those in Cook County stayed in care until at least age 21 compared to only 35% of youth from all other counties.⁴

We know something about how these youth fare once they leave the system from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), a prospective ongoing study conducted by researchers at Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago,⁵ and from a new study of relational permanence among former foster youth by Gina Miranda Samuels.⁶

In the study of Illinois youth at age 19, Courtney and Dworsky present a mixed picture. Some youth, despite multiple losses and disruptions in their lives, are able to establish markers of late adolescence and early adulthood—graduating from high school and entering college, getting an apartment,

finding employment and developing social networks. However, too many face significant challenges:⁷

- Of Illinois youth who were no longer in care, 45 percent lacked a high school diploma.
- Two-thirds of the young people who were still in care at age 19 were enrolled in school or a training program compared with 20 percent of the young people who had exited.
- Forty-six percent of the 19 year olds who were no longer in care, were disconnected (that is, neither working nor in school) compared with 24 percent of those who were still in care.
- Former foster youth were twice as likely to have experienced economic hardship, such as not having enough money to pay the rent or utility bill or having phone service discontinued.⁸
- More than half of the young people who were no longer in care had no health insurance.
- Young people who have exited were almost twice as likely to have been arrested, more than three times as likely to have been convicted of a crime and more than twice as likely to have spent at least one night “behind bars” since their initial interview than young people who were still in care.⁹

Samuels interviewed young adults with foster care backgrounds about their social support networks. She concluded that many youth “are experiencing what might be termed *psychological homelessness*.”¹⁰ Having cycled in and out of relationships with biological relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers, they long for “home” and an ongoing connection with their parents. The pervasive sense of unresolved or ambiguous loss¹¹ adds emotional complexity to their relationships.

Samuels stresses that the young adults she interviewed also offered examples of resilience and resistance to a child welfare system that excluded their participation in decisions important to their future, such as those about adoption. Most of the young people in her study valued relationships that had endured their time in foster care, where they had a shared history, but did not have confidence in permanence as defined by the child welfare system or trust adoption as a reliable path to familial support.



To inform the development of supports for these young people through policy and practice, Samuels recommends:

- *Address the need for emotional support* in dealing with the emotional complexities of navigating relationships with biological and foster parents developing new relationships. While some young people in her study noted the need for mental health services, most wanted someone they could trust “who could provide informed emotional guidance and a level of insight not currently available to them within their social network.”¹²
- *Use a youth development philosophy*⁴³ of child welfare practice. “Central to this is the development of relational skills to sustain interpersonal connections,”¹⁴ a concept that runs counter to the notion of “independent living” and promotes the idea of relational interdependence as central to successful adult independence.
- *Adopt a broad and dynamic conceptualization of family* that embraces multiple family relationships, memberships and affiliations and recognizes that the biological family remains psychologically present even when biologically absent.

Support for Youth Aging Out of the Foster Care

Federal funds to support older youth in foster care come to Illinois through the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which requires states to provide independent living services to youth who are “likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age,” are “aging out of foster care” or have aged out of care and are between the ages of 18 through 21.¹⁵ States are not precluded from using Chafee funds to provide services to other former foster care youth ages 18 to 21 who exited care prior to their eighteenth birthday.¹⁶

In addition to room and board, services provided under Chafee may consist of educational assistance, vocational training, mentoring, preventive health activities, and counseling. For youth likely to remain in care until 18 years of age, states may apply to spend funds to:

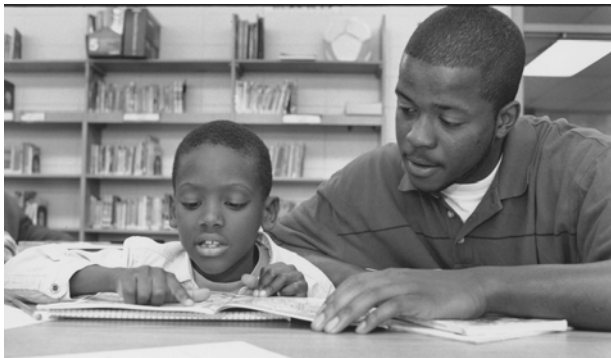
1. Provide independent living and related services.
2. Enable access to the education, training, and services necessary to obtain employment.
3. Help them to prepare for and enter postsecondary training and educational institutions.
4. Provide personal and emotional support to youth through mentoring and positive interactions with caring adults.
5. Provide financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, and other appropriate support and services to former foster care youth between ages 18 and 21 to complement their own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and to assure that they recognize and accept personal responsibility for making the transition from adolescence to adulthood.
6. Make education and training vouchers available to youth who have aged out of care.¹⁷

This is an impressive array of possible services. However, Courtney et al.¹⁸ found that few of the youth they interviewed at age 21 had received services in the past year. Only about 30 percent of the Midwest Study youth received any of these Chafee-funded services after leaving care. Notably, only 5 percent of the 21-year-olds in the Midwest Study reported receiving mentoring. This is remarkable considering the need for emotional support from a trusted, consistently available adult expressed by Samuels' interviewees. Illinois has done somewhat better than other Midwestern states in providing mentoring, especially for youth who remain in care. Courtney and Dworsky¹⁹ report that among Illinois youth at age 19, 7.5 percent who had left care received mentoring during the previous year, while 18.6 percent who were still in care received mentoring.

Taking Action: Youth to Adulthood Partnerships

There are good relationships among researchers, public officials, service providers and child advocates in Illinois, as well as considerable momentum and desire to address the needs of youth aging out of the child welfare system. Recently, Voices for Illinois Children convened interested groups and individuals to develop an agenda and to work on specific policy and program initiatives. The goal is for all Illinois young people in and aging out of the child welfare system to have the education, life experiences, and personal relationships to move on to fulfilling work and to happy, healthy lives as engaged citizens and parents of the next generation.

The Youth to Adulthood Partnership (YTAP) was created in March 2008. The 35 members of the group include judges, researchers, youth advocates, community members and representatives from state agencies, school systems and service providers. They have a wide range of responsibilities for and



opinions about the care of children and youth in the child welfare system.

While the diverse members of YTAP agree on many issues, they are aware of philosophical differences between the traditional approach of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the youth development approach. The responsibility of DCFS is to keep children safe and to ensure their well-being. For youth preparing to leave care, DCFS has stressed the transition to independent living and practical skills necessary to manage on one's own. A youth development approach would include

relational skill development so that young adults leaving foster care can sustain healthy, mutually supportive relationships rather than just ending or avoiding negative ones. The youth development approach also recognizes the normative role of experimentation and false starts on the road to adulthood. Creating opportunities to return for help as an “alumnus” of the system requires both flexibility and additional resources.

Along with the rest of the country, Illinois has moved vigorously in the past decade toward “permanency,” that is, returning the child to the parental home or facilitating adoption with relatives or non-relatives. Samuels’ interviewees made clear, however, that permanent solutions were not always optimal or even permanent. While in state care, these young people were not able to be returned to their families of origin, though that family remained very much psychologically present. For some who were adopted, the adoption failed. Samuels comments that the “realities attached to broken promises and ambiguous losses not only damage one’s sense of confidence to maintain close relationships but one’s trust in any relationship’s permanence.”

Lacking real or perceived emotional support from others, children and youth in foster care develop self-reliance and self-protective skills while they are in care. While these can sometimes be stumbling blocks, they are also strengths. To build on these assets and organize their discussions, YTAP members have adapted the research-based principles of the Strengthening Families Initiative.¹ They have asked, How do we help youth (1) build resilience; (2) have available concrete supports that they know how to access; (3) develop social competence and healthy connections; (4) understand personal development; and (5) understand parent and child development? The group intends to apply the principles to all youth, including those with special needs such as mental illness or pregnancy. The group recommends working on transition issues earlier, as young as 13, and allow for practice, mistakes, and natural consequences on their path to adulthood.

The YTAP group has identified several coordinated program and policy changes that would enable youth in the child welfare system to transition successfully to adulthood. Initially, they have chosen to focus on these goals:

1. Offer to young adults up to age 24 the same health, housing, employment and educational benefits as presently mandated for youth up to age 21.
2. Allow for a six-month “trial discharge,” as legislated in other states, for young adults who leave DCFS care before age 21.
3. Identify and build the skills necessary for self-reliant, independent and interdependent young adults; change current program approaches and requirements to meet the needs of an older youth population.

The YTAP group is moving forward to develop legislative and program strategies that are based on research, innovative system designs and the experiences of foster care alumni.



Endnotes

¹ Bob Schoeni and Karen Ross, "Material Assistance Received from Families During the Transition to Adulthood." In Richard A. Setterstein, Jr., Frank F. Furstenburg, Jr., and Ruben Rumbaut, eds., *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, pp. 404-405. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

² Quoted in Gina Miranda Samuels, *A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime: Relational Permanence Among Youth Adults with Foster Care Backgrounds*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2008, p. 53.

³ *Illinois Kids Count 2008*, pp. 38, 40. Chicago: Voices for Illinois Children. Data from Children and Family Research Center at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, analysis of data from Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

⁴ Data from Amy Dworsky, Chapin Hall, 2009.

⁵ Mark E. Courtney and Amy Dworsky. *Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth from Illinois: Outcomes at age 19*. Working paper CS-116. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, January 2006. Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Judy Havlicek, Alfred Perez, and Tom Keller, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, December 2007.

⁶ Samuels, 2008.

⁷ From Courtney and Dworsky, 2006.

⁸ K. Harris, F. Florey, J. Tabor, P. Bearman, J. Jones, and J.R. Urdy. *The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health: Research Design*. Available: <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/design>.

⁹ From Courtney et al., 2007.

¹⁰ Samuels, p. 75.

¹¹ This concept has been developed by Pauline Boss in *Ambiguous Loss*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999; and *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, New York: Norton, 2006.

¹² Samuels, p. 80.

¹³ M.E. Collins, "Enhancing Services to Youths Leaving Foster Care: Analysis of Recent Legislation and Its Potential Impact," *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 156-165, 2004.

¹⁴ Samuels, p. 82.

¹⁵ Fernandes, p. 15.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Welfare Policy Manual*, Section 3.1B, Question 2.

¹⁷ Fernandes, p. CRS-24.

¹⁸ Courtney et al., 2007, pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ Courtney and Dworsky, 2006, p. 20.

²⁰ Samuels, p. 43.

²¹ See S. Kools, "Self Protection in Adolescents in Foster Care." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 12(4), 139-152, 1999; and G. Samuels and J. Pryce, under review, 2008.

²² www.strengtheningfamilies.net; www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org

This issue brief examines the status of Illinois youth in and aging out of foster care and the supports available to them. The Youth to Adulthood Partnership has taken the initiative to develop program and policy recommendations for older youth and young adults leaving the child welfare system.

About Voices for Illinois Children

Voices for Illinois Children works across all issue areas to improve the lives of children of all ages throughout the state, making sure they grow up healthy, nurtured, safe and well educated. For over 20 years, Voices has been helping opinion leaders and policymakers understand the issues facing children and families. The Voices network weaves through the state, involving community leaders and people who care passionately about children. As a privately funded organization, Voices has ensured earlier investments in children and has improved education, health care and other vital services. Gaylord Gieseke is the Interim President of Voices for Illinois Children, and Craig R. Culbertson is Chair of the Board of Directors.

About the Youth to Adulthood Partnership (YTAP)

Despite their history of loss and multiple disruptions, youth aging out of the child welfare system are expected to make it on their own long before their peers and with far fewer resources. Many are struggling as young adults. Illinois' child welfare system has made great strides. It is now time to address the needs of youth aging out of the system so that they can become productive members of our society. Voices for Illinois Children has convened judges, researchers, youth advocates, community members and representatives from state agencies, school systems and service providers to develop an agenda and work on specific policy and program initiatives to help youth make the transition to adulthood from the child welfare system more successful. YTAP is developing recommendations based on research, innovative program designs and the experiences of youth formerly in foster care.

To learn more, please visit www.voices4kids.org or contact Michelle Arnold at marnold@voices4kids.org or 312-516-5564.