

POLICY BRIEF:

FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS 2023

The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s new report, “[Fostering Youth Transitions 2023](#),” lays bare the challenges and the opportunities for youth experiencing foster care across the country. The latest data shines a light on the fact that many of the systems and supports meant to equip youth in foster care on their climb to adulthood are underfunded, inaccessible, or fundamentally broken. These findings are nothing short of an alarm bell that federal policymakers should heed as an urgent call to action.

At the same time, the report emphasizes what we have long known: There is enormous untapped potential to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of youth in foster care through targeted support and resources during their pivotal adolescent years.

“Fostering Youth Transitions 2023” reveals a clear picture about the unmet needs of youth in foster care and urges decision-makers to take immediate steps to better equip these young people to thrive as they become adults.

Federal policymakers should examine [the report’s state profiles](#) to understand how youth in foster care are faring in their home states. The Journey to Success campaign stands ready to partner with policymakers to develop and advance practical, grounded, youth-informed policies that improve outcomes for older youth in care.

WE URGE POLICYMAKERS TO TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION IN THREE KEY AREAS:

#1

Prioritize family ties and permanent family connections to provide those lifelong relationships that youth need most to succeed

#2

Invest in and redesign Chafee to ensure youth in foster care are plugged in to supportive relationships and services

#3

Improve extended foster care to provide the supportive services youth and young adults most need in young adulthood

#1

Prioritize family ties and permanent family connections to provide those lifelong relationships that youth need most to succeed

The goal for most children and youth in foster care is to return safely home or to live with relatives. When reunification is not possible, the goal is to connect youth to a new permanent lifelong family through adoption or guardianship. Why? Because all children do best in families and deserve to have the sense of belonging and love that families offer throughout their lives. To provide these young people with the lasting connections they need to thrive, policymakers should create programs that prioritize strong relationships and connections to family.

RECOMMENDED POLICY ACTIONS

- + Address the barriers that prevent youth in foster care from living with relatives or in family-based settings while in foster care.
 - Increase support for kinship placements.
 - Require recruitment and retention of kin and non-kin foster families to be developed in close partnership with families and to be data-driven.
 - Require child welfare agencies to provide a core set of supports to kin and non-kin foster families that provide services they say are vitally important to quality caregiving: crisis mental health; respite care; peer support for family caregivers; peer support for youth; and timely access to mental and behavioral health supports that are relationship-based and holistic.
- + Strengthen and incentivize permanency through reunification, and continue incentives for permanency through guardianship and adoption.
- + Enforce and strengthen current laws to protect and support sibling connections.
- + Make youth engagement in permanency planning a practice norm. Incentivize agencies and courts to achieve wide-scale implementation of best practices in youth engagement; invest in training for agencies, judges and court professionals; clarify that peer delivered services and youth engagement activities are IV-E reimbursable.
- + Support state and local foster care agencies in developing their workforce so they can provide tailored and intensive permanency services for youth and young adults. Ensure states' workforce investments are reimbursable through Title I-VE.
- + Improve effectiveness in permanency services by increasing involvement of youth in continuous program improvement, including methods of obtaining youth feedback.
- + Support youth and young adults who are parenting so they and their children can thrive, including access to critical parenting support such as child care, and tailored educational and employment services.
- + Ensure Family First prevention services meet the needs of youth and their families to safely prevent entries into foster care.

FAMILY TIES AND PERMANENCE:

WHAT THE DATA TELL US

- **We are failing to connect youth to family.** The permanency rate for teens and young adults ages 16 to 21 is declining. Nearly half of teens in foster care age out of foster care on their own without being connected in a permanent way to family through reunification, adoption, or kinship guardianship.
- **We continue to place too many young people in group care.** One in four teens in foster care have a foster care placement in a group setting, even though we know that youth in these settings are less likely to leave foster care to rejoin family in a permanent way. Youth in group placements also are less likely to have strong relationships with supportive adults, which are important protective factors that promote youth mental health and success in school and work.
- **We are missing critical opportunities to keep youth with their families and out of foster care altogether by addressing basic and concrete needs.** “Neglect” is the most frequently cited reason for removing teens from their home, with neglect being a reason for half of the youth who entered foster care in 2020. Neglect is often related to poverty, which indicates that by connecting families in economic crisis with the right support and resources, we can prevent many teens from entering foster care in the first place.

#2

Invest in and redesign Chafee to ensure youth in foster care are plugged in to supportive relationships and services

Most youth in foster care are coping with trauma stemming from adversity in their early years; therefore, helping youth heal through positive relationships and experiences is foundational to their successful transition to young adulthood. Congress created the Chafee program nearly 25 years ago specifically to fund services with the specific goal of helping foster youth transition successfully to young adulthood. The vision of Chafee remains as important as ever, but the latest data show that the program is falling woefully short. Policymakers should make targeted investments and redesign both the array of services and how they are delivered to maximize the intended impact of the program.

RECOMMENDED POLICY ACTIONS

- + Make healing and family connections a priority for Chafee eligible youth by ensuring they receive permanency services that lead to reunification, kinship guardianship, or adoptions. Make healthy relationships something that all youth in foster care can develop and have.
- + Increase investment in the Chafee program by at least \$100M/year to address the resource needs of state and local agencies so they can improve access to supportive relationships and services and serve more eligible youth and young adults.
- + Give states the flexibility to serve youth and young adults up to age 26, which aligns with developmental stages and matches the eligibility age for Medicaid coverage and Education and Training Vouchers (ETV).

- + Update the Chafee program's array of services and incentivize state and local agencies to utilize community-based services that youth say are most important, including peer-delivered services, mentors and supportive relationships, concrete supports (including financial assistance), transportation, and help brokering access to housing, health, and mental health services.
- + Importantly, improve the effectiveness of Chafee services by:
 - Promoting positive outcomes by reinvesting in effective and engaging programming
 - developing outcome measures in partnership with youth, alumni, and stakeholders and incentivizing positive outcomes
 - increasing the involvement of youth in continuous program improvement efforts, including by requiring agencies to utilize a diversity of methods to obtain youth feedback
- + Incentivize agencies to develop outreach policies so that more youth and young adults are aware of the service array available to them. Providing technical assistance to help agencies develop effective
 - robust outreach policies and practices
 - low barrier methods for youth to access services
 - interagency information sharing agreements to maximize the use of data to connect with eligible young people
- + Support initiatives that improve access to driver's licenses for eligible youth in foster care
- + Require child welfare agencies to coordinate with credit rating agencies to streamline the process to request and resolve any problems revealed in a credit report and policies that promote the building of assets and financial capability. This includes assistance to youth in addressing credit fraud and having their personal documents.

CHAFEE:

WHAT THE DATA TELL US

- **Chafee services are not reaching large numbers of eligible youth.** More than half of eligible youth ages 14-21 never received a Chafee-funded service.
- **Only 1 in 4 eligible youth received a Chafee-funded service (in 2021).** These services can make a measurable difference in the lives of youth in foster care, but only if youth are connected to them.
- **Young adults with foster care experience have poorer outcomes than their peers who didn't experience foster care.** At age 21:
 - 79 percent of youth from foster care had earned a high school diploma or General Educational Development credential, compared to 92 percent of their peers in the general population.
 - 24 percent of youth from foster care had been enrolled in post-secondary education or training. By comparison, 50 percent of 21-year-olds in the general population had attended a post-secondary institution.
 - 55 percent of youth from foster care were employed full time or part time, while 64 percent of their peers in the general population had jobs.

#3

Improve extended foster care to provide the supportive services youth and young adults most need in young adulthood

Youth leaving foster care need safe and stable housing, assistance with school and work, and support in building healthy lifelong relationships. Congress enacted legislation in 2008 to give states the option to receive federal reimbursement for extending foster care, adoption, and guardianship assistance beyond age 18. This seminal legislative achievement was motivated by youth-driven advocacy and was intended to provide a period of extended support for youth aging out of foster care on their own. Research on implementation shows that extended foster care is an effective intervention and good investment—even a small dose of extended foster care can drive better results for youth and young adults.

RECOMMENDED POLICY ACTIONS

- + Guide and incentivize states in designing more effective extended care services and programs that young people will want to utilize. This includes elevating the focus on permanency planning, ensuring that young people have safe and age-appropriate living settings, ensuring youth and young adult involvement in their case planning, and training caseworkers to have specialized skills in supporting young adults.
- + Encourage and incentivize agencies to collaborate with youth and young adults to raise awareness about the benefits of extended foster care and other programs that support successful transitions to adulthood.
- + Eliminate barriers to extended foster care programs by:
 - making all youth who have not achieved permanency by age 18 categorically eligible
 - eliminating outdated income eligibility requirements to rebalance the federal state partnership
- + Support and protect the rights of all youth in foster care, including young parents' rights to their own children, through high-quality legal representation and other avenues.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE:**WHAT THE DATA TELL US**

- **To date, 33 states, including D.C, Puerto Rico, and nine tribes provide extended foster care programs that are federally reimbursable.**
- **Despite the availability of federal reimbursement for extended foster care, participation is low.** Nationally, only 22 percent of youth in foster care on their 18th birthday are utilizing extended foster care options a year later.

- Youth who do participate in extended foster care, especially young people of color, have improved outcomes including:
 - increased high school completion and enrollment in college;
 - improved employment; and
 - improved earnings and savings. For every \$1 invested in extended foster care, there is a \$2 return in increased earnings based on completion of a bachelor’s degree.

CONCLUSION

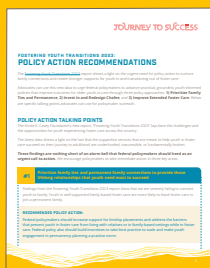
We can and must create a better path for these young people by improving our child welfare systems—and the policies that support and govern them. Doing so will ensure that youth who experience foster care can achieve health and well-being, establish lifelong family connections, and attain economic security.

Many federal policymakers have been long-standing champions for youth in foster care and—galvanized by youth-driven advocacy—have made possible a series of legislative victories over the past 25 years. These latest findings about the lack of access to services and declining permanence rates are a clear signal that now is the time for policymakers to again step up for youth in foster care.

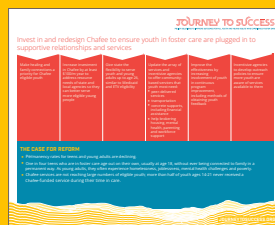
For more information about the Journey to Success campaign and to access the full set of Fostering Youth Transitions 2023 tools for policymakers, please visit www.journeytosuccess.org/fostering-youth-transitions-2023



[Fostering Youth Transitions 2023 Community Conversations Guide](#)



[Fostering Youth Transitions 2023 Policy Recommendations & Talking Points](#)



[Fostering Youth Transitions 2023 Chafee One-Pager](#)



[Fostering Youth Transitions 2023 Extended Foster Care One-Pager](#)



[Fostering Youth Transitions 2023 Family One-Pager](#)