

POLICY SPOTLIGHT: DRIVER'S LICENSES FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Every year, in households across America, parents support young people in learning to drive and earn driver's licenses and most critically, provide insurance for these young drivers. These families understand that a driver's license is a critical step in the journey to adulthood as it facilitates access to better educational opportunities, jobs and age-appropriate cultural and social enrichment and activities.

KEY POINTS

Studies have shown that **teens with access to a car do better in school, get better jobs, have more college options, and eventually, have more successful careers.**

For teens in foster care, a driver's license is proven to be critically important to their success and a critical feature of providing "normalcy" for these youths.

What's more, **for youth in foster care, a driver's license is an important form of identification**, without which they have difficulty traveling, securing an apartment, or being gainfully employed.

Recognizing the significant importance of personal identification to youth leaving foster care, **in 2015 Congress required that states provide documentation in the form of a driver's license or comparable identification to youth who are exiting foster care**, although reports of implementation suggest uneven adherence to this policy.

In recent years, state policymakers have taken some initial steps to address barriers that foster youth face in learning to drive and earning a license.

These include state legislation that permits minors to purchase insurance, apply for an instruction permit with the signature of a parent or guardian, and contract with a non-profit to provide support for youth navigating the driver's license process.

The most comprehensive of these programs is operational in Florida through the "Keys to Independence" program that directs funding to secure a permit or license as well as support for insurance for the youth in foster care.

In 2014, the Florida Legislature passed and then Governor Rick Scott signed the "Keys to Independence Act." This legislation recognized that a young adult will be less likely to be fully independent without a driver's license. The "Keys to Independence Act" provides for reimbursement for the cost of a license and most critical – the cost to insure the foster youth once they complete a driver's education program.

Prior to the enactment of the "Keys to Independence Act," very few youths in Florida's foster care system had a driver's license. In just a few short years, Florida was able to help over 3600 youths obtain driver's permits and licenses. This has resulted in increased independence, access to normal experiences, and job and educational opportunities for foster youth.

“I am very fortunate to have earned a license through the program, *Keys To Independence* in Florida. The program paid for two driver’s ed courses, two tests for both my permit and my license, and supported me every step of the way. Had it not been for such a program, I would most likely have taken far too many more tests and failed, be unable to drive until I’m in my late 20s, and so much more. My only hope is that other states can take the example that Florida has set, as it’s encouraging to all kids in care and who were formerly in care.”

- FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

The “KEYS” program was the inspiration for bipartisan, bicameral legislation – the *Foster Youth and Driving Act* – recently introduced in the 118th Congress by Representative Danny Davis (D-IL), Representative Don Bacon (R-NE), Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH) and Senator Todd Young (R-IN).

The companion bills (H.R. 1446 and S. 699) amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act by:

- Expanding foster parent training to specify skills related to preparing a youth to drive and assistance in obtaining a driver’s license and insurance.
- Requiring case plans for youth, starting at age 14, to include plans for helping youth prepare to drive, obtain a driver’s license and insurance, and apply as needed for driving and transportation assistance.
- Providing funds to states for a driving and transportation assistance program to assist with costs of insurance, driver’s education classes, testing fees, and other costs related to obtaining

a driver’s license and driving legally in the state. Benefits are capped at \$4,000 per year per individual, and assistance will not be included in the child’s gross income or count against them in applying for other federal benefit programs.

- Allowing for assistance with the purchase of an automobile.
- Including annual state reporting requirements to HHS, including data on the numbers of youth in foster care (or formerly in foster care) who have attained driver’s licenses and related information.
- Providing technical assistance for states that wish to start a program to support foster youth in obtaining a driver’s license.

The proposed federal policy would create vital opportunities for youth by improving work retention and educational attainment, facilitating age appropriate social and cultural opportunities by facilitating access to driver’s licenses.