

Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

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One of the populations targeted by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (DOL/ETA) as most at risk of dropping out of high school is youth aging out of foster care. Foster youth make up the only group to be involuntarily separated from their families through government intervention.

Who Is a Foster Child?

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) defines a foster child as a youth on behalf of whom state or local government payments are made (WIA §101(25)(E)).

For purposes of WIA eligibility in Ohio,

- A foster child is any child in the legal custody of the state, regardless of the state department that has custody. A child on whose behalf state or local government payments are made or a child in the legal custody of the Department of Youth Services is considered a foster child.

Source: Workforce411, *Workforce Development Glossary*, “Foster Child.”

- Foster Child – an individual who **is** in foster care or **has been** in foster care

Source: WIA Youth Eligibility and Documentation Training, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), February 6, 2008.

“Placement in foster care” means the arrangement by a public children services agency or a private child placing agency for the out-of-home care of a child of whom the agency has temporary custody or permanent custody.

Source: ORC Section 2151.011(36).

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Youth in foster care receive “services” in a private home or in group homes that are usually provided by parents – housing, food, clothing, medical care, transportation, and so on. Although foster care is intended to be temporary and the goal is reunification of parents and children, when youth age out of foster care, they lose all of their foster care services and they must provide them for themselves. Youth must now make a transition to independent adult living all on their own.

Youth typically age out of foster care when they reach age 18. Now without foster care services, they face many obstacles in their transition to employment, further education, and independent adult living. Obstacles include limited education attainment, homelessness, unemployment, mental health problems, poverty, dependence on public assistance, and a lack of positive role models. Foster youth may lack positive role models or the opportunity to form lasting relationships with caring adults.

Although post-foster care services are available to youth, some youth who are transitioning out of foster care fall through the cracks. It is vital to reach them before that happens to improve their chances for success.

Characteristics of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Foster youth are expected to live independently long before most of their peers. Many of the over 20,000 youth (about 1,000 in Ohio) who age out of foster care each year have many characteristics in common. They are more likely to experience negative outcomes and less likely to experience positive outcomes than their peers.

- 84.8 percent do not have a high school diploma or GED.
- 22 percent are homeless.
- 16.8 percent are on public assistance.
- 33.2 percent are below the poverty level.
- 25 percent are involved in crime.
- 54.4 percent have behavioral and emotional problems, school problems, and mental and physical health issues.
- 50 percent experience early pregnancy.
- 90 percent have had sexual intercourse.
- Only 20 percent complete any college.
- Only 33 percent have health insurance.
- Only 48 percent are employed full time.

Assistance Programs

There are a variety of programs that assist foster youth in making the transition to independent adult living. Chafee programs are funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Ohio's Chafee programs, as well as foster care programs, are administered by county public children services agencies (PCSAs) and supervised by ODJFS.

- **Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP)** offers assistance to current and former foster youth to help them achieve independence. Services include mental health services, life skills, mentoring, employment preparation, education, and housing stipends. CFCIP expands services to youth until they are 21 with states contributing 20 percent in matching funds.
- **Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs)** provide funds for postsecondary education and training.
- The **Chafee Option** provides a bridge for states to extend Medicaid coverage for youth leaving foster care up to age 21. In Ohio, youth aging out of foster care may request services from their county PCSA.
- The **Family Unification Program (FUP)** offers housing and transitional assistance.

In addition to Chafee programs, other programs can provide services to youth aging out of foster care.

- **Youthbuild** is a residential program that provides housing as well as education and employment training to eligible youth, including foster youth. Authorized by the Housing and Community Development Act of 1992 and sponsored by the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Youthbuild awards grants to state and local governments or other organizations to provide services to eligible populations.
- **Job Corps** also provides housing as well as education and employment training to eligible youth, including foster youth. Job Corps is a no-cost education and vocational training program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor that helps young people ages 16 through 24 get a better job, make more money, and take control of their lives.
- **WIA youth programs** do not provide housing for youth aging out of foster care but provide many other services to help WIA youth participants make a successful transition to independent adult living.

The federal Fostering Adoption to Further Student Achievement Act, P.L. 110-84, which will take effect in July, 2009, will make it possible for teens in foster care to be adopted without losing access to college financial aid. Under this new law, youth who were in foster care at any point on or after their 13th birthday, regardless of whether they were adopted later, will not have to include their parents' income in the calculations for determining their need for financial aid.

Youth aging out of foster care are eligible for WIA youth services (WIA §101(13), 20 CFR 664.20). Because they often lack education and occupational skills, they are excellent prospects for WIA. It is important to reach youth **before** they completely transition out of foster care.

- Contact county PCSAs in your local area to identify staff responsible for foster care programs and Chafee programs.
- Contact those staff to share information about foster care programs, Chafee programs, and WIA programs.
- Work with PCSA foster care staff to identify foster youth before they leave the foster care system.
- Work with Chafee program staff to identify Chafee foster youth who might benefit from WIA youth services.
- Agree on referral procedures among programs.
- Ask PCSA staff to identify other agencies and programs that might serve youth aging out of foster care – particularly other foster care agencies and foster care group homes but also Youthbuild, Job Corps, social services agencies, managers, school guidance counselors, and community or faith-based organizations.
- Make contact and establish working relationships with those agencies and programs.
- Invite foster youth in group homes to visit the WIA youth agency or attend a WIA youth event such as an orientation to WIA, a booth at a job fair, or an open house.

The importance of networking and cooperation among agencies and organizations that serve foster youth cannot be overemphasized. WIA youth services professionals should work closely with those agencies and organizations to identify youth aging out of foster care. Working together will ensure that those youth are identified and served in ways that would allow them to transition successfully to employment, further education, and independent adult living.

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