



# RAISING OUR VOICES

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS  
TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING FOR CHILDREN  
AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE



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## FOREWORD FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The odds are stacked against youth who have experienced the U.S. foster care system. There are significant opportunity gaps that perpetuate broader inequalities in our society. In the United States, over 391,000 children and youth are living without permanent families in the foster care system. 21 years ago, CCAI developed the Foster Youth Internship® (FYI) Program in response to the poor outcomes youth experience in the U.S. foster care system. The FYI program serves as a platform to uplift the voices of lived expertise advocates in federal policy to engage and educate Members of Congress on permanency issues related to child welfare in the United States.



As we celebrate more than two decades of the FYI Program, CCAI is honored to introduce twelve leaders, the authors of this report, to Congress, the Administration, and community of changemakers. These leaders have spent their summer researching and writing federal policy recommendations on important topics related to foster care reform including access to higher education and housing, ensuring safety and stability for vulnerable children and families, extending resources to adopted youth, foster care and trafficking pipeline, kinship care reform, preventing sibling separation, strengthening mental health services for foster and kinship caregivers, and youth engagement in policy.

Aoguzi, Chris, Eunice, Faith, Gianna, Glenda, Idelia, Isabel, Jamarri, Jessica, Kayleen, and Nyomi: thank you for raising your voices in advocacy toward a better future in removing barriers, expanding equitable access, improving outcomes, and ensuring that children, youth, and families who encounter the U.S. child welfare system do not face the same obstacles that you experienced.

We have sincere gratitude for the leadership from our Board of Directors and support from faithful partners. We give special thanks to: American Council of Life Insurers, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Apollo Global Management, Arnold & Porter, Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, Carlson Family Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Constellation, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Retail Orphan Initiative, and Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

We are delighted to introduce the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's 2023 Foster Youth Internship Program® federal policy report, *Raising Our Voices: Recommendations for Policymakers to Support Well-Being for Children and Youth in Foster Care*. We hope you are inspired by the ideas and solutions for change.

Kate McLean  
Executive Director

## ABOUT CCAI



### MISSION

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute is dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children around the world in need of permanent, safe, and nurturing families and to eliminating the barriers that hinder these children from realizing their basic right to a family.

### VISION

Our vision is a world in which every child knows the love and support of a family.

### HISTORY

CCAI was founded in 2001 by advocates of children in the U.S. and around the world in need of safe and nurturing families. In founding CCAI, these advocates sought to match the commitment of Members of Congress' Adoption Caucus, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption (CCA), with the information and resources needed to make the dream of a family a reality for every child through the creation of CCAI. As a convener, CCAI brings together voices of experience and expertise to the U.S. Congress. CCAI believes every child deserves a family and every family deserves a caring community.

Although the Adoption Caucus (CCA) and CCAI are distinct entities, they are closely linked in partnership. Over 140 Members of the 118th Congress have joined and are actively engaged in supporting legislation and policy that improves the lives of children and families in the United States and around the world. Both the CCA and CCAI are deeply committed to bipartisanship, strengthening families, and permanency.

CCAI is unique in that each of our programs brings together policymakers and individuals with direct foster care or adoption experience. When Members of Congress hear direct experiences of those affected by child welfare systems, they become engaged in this issue and work to bring about legislative improvements to ensure each child's right to a family is realized.

## ABOUT THE FYI PROGRAM



### FOSTER YOUTH INTERNSHIP PROGRAM®

CCAI's Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program® is a congressional internship for individuals who have experienced the foster care system to raise awareness to federal policymakers about permanency, foster care, child welfare, financing, abuse, and neglect. Since 2003, the FYI Program provided the Foster Youth Interns (FYIs) the opportunity to intern in a congressional office on Capitol Hill — both exposing the FYIs to the policymaking process as well as raising awareness to federal policymakers about the needs and unique perspectives of those who have spent time in foster care.

For the past 15 years, since 2008, the FYI Program has offered the Foster Youth Interns the opportunity to use their newfound understanding of Capitol Hill and federal policy to research and write a policy report. The interns focus on topics they are personally passionate about, generally linked to their own experience in foster care, and make policy recommendations to improve the U.S. child welfare system for children who are currently in foster care. This report and its recommendations are disseminated across the country and presented by the interns in briefings to the U.S. Congress, White House Domestic Policy Council, and beginning in 2019, at two additional briefings to industry leaders in the private sector and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Many of these policy recommendations have been passed into law.

After their time on Capitol Hill, CCAI's Foster Youth Interns have gone on to work in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, White House, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, community banks, law firms, counseling groups, national child welfare organizations, and state child welfare agencies. Many FYIs also pursue degrees of higher education after obtaining undergraduate degrees. Moreover, the FYIs leave Washington, D.C. with experience and skills that continue to bolster their careers and provide a foundation for them to become lifelong advocates for youth in foster care.

*Note: The opinions, findings, and conclusions presented in the Foster Youth Internship Program® Policy Report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the view of CCAI including leadership, donors, and partners.*

# 2023 FOSTER YOUTH INTERN POLICY REPORTS:

# PREVENTING MENTAL HEALTH CRISES BY TRAINING AND SUPPORTING THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

*By Gianna Bottom*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To better support the mental health of foster youth, Congress should 1) mandate the development of a federally funded, standardized training program to be required of all adoptive parents and foster parents, 2) direct the Children’s Bureau in consultation with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and other relevant federal agencies to develop this training, and 3) mandate the training module be updated by a mental health professional panel.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At least 80% of youth in foster care struggle with mental health issues (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023). Yet, many lack access to appropriate services and treatment, with caregivers often struggling to support them because they lack the tools to do so. The creation of a standardized federal training program for foster parents, with a specific focus on supporting youth with mental health challenges, is critical to ensuring the well-being of all youth in care.

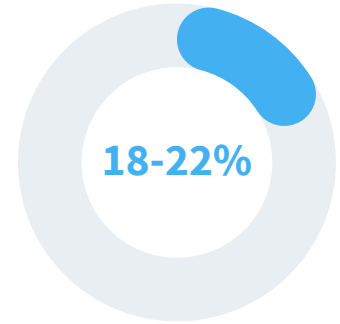
## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I experienced mental health challenges as a result of being in the foster care system over the course of two years after coming from an abusive household. I was six years old when I entered the foster care system and the first feeling I remember having was confusion. I did not realize my living situation was abnormal, but nonetheless wondered why I was being taken away from my biological parents, who I ultimately never saw again. I struggled with feelings of abandonment while also trying to cope with the physical traumas I encountered across living situations. I was physically abused and witnessed rape in my own household and then experienced severe malnourishment in my foster home. I became untrusting of people and developed mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. I lacked access to the mental health services and supports I knew I needed. While my adoptive parents tried to help me, they did not have the training to enable them to know how best to handle and support an older child with this level of trauma.

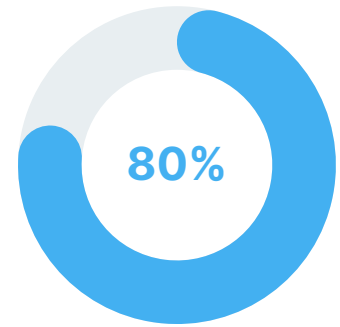
**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW**

Today, nearly 400,000 children and youth are in the foster care system and approximately 80% of all foster youth struggle with mental health, compared to just 18%-22% of all youth (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023). Currently, there is no federal standard training for becoming a foster or adoptive parent, leaving states to decide what level of training - if at all - is required. The absence of a federally-mandated training program for foster parents means that foster parents and youth have unequal access to resources state-by-state, creating not only inequities, but resource instability when foster youth move locations.

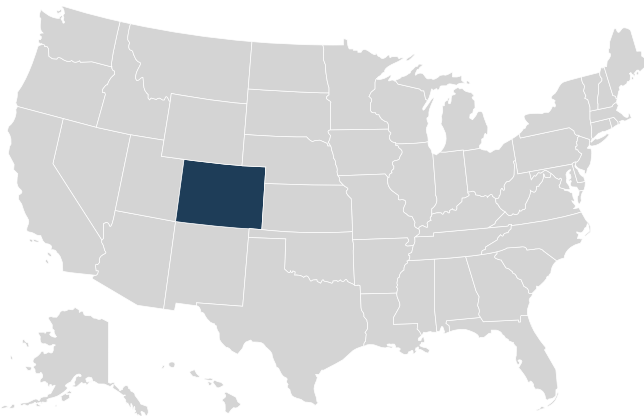
For example, Hawaii only requires a foster parent to show proof of experience with children and no specific training addressing the special needs of foster youth (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Meanwhile, Colorado has a significantly more extensive training program that requires foster parents to have 27 hours of pre-certification training that covers multiple topics, 12 hours of core training, be certified in first aid, and complete 20 hours of ongoing training annually (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).



**Approximately 18%-22% of all youth struggle with mental health.**



**Approximately 80% of foster youth struggle with mental health.**



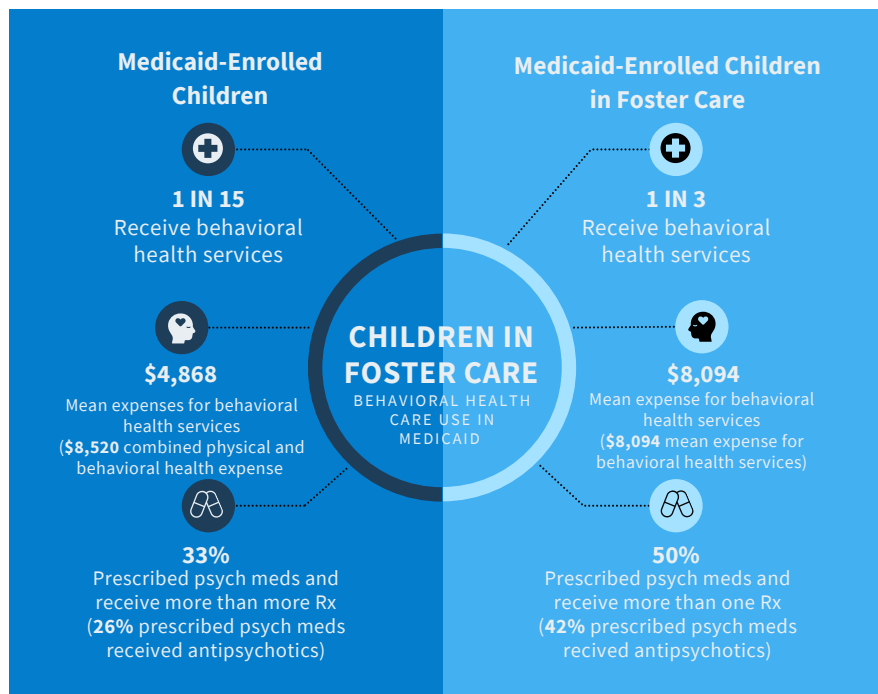
*Colorado has a significantly more extensive training program that requires foster parents to have **27 hours of pre-certification training** that covers multiple topics, **12 hours of core training**, be **certified in first aid**, and complete **20 hours of ongoing training** annually.*



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support the mental health of foster youth, Congress should:

- **Mandate the development of a federally funded, standardized training program to be required of all adoptive parents and foster parents** that includes training regarding coping mechanisms, de-escalation techniques, mental health types, first aid, and intervention techniques related to youth mental health. In addition to the initial training prior to any first placement, all foster parents must take a refresher course annually to continue to be eligible to foster.
- **Direct the Children’s Bureau, in consultation with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and other relevant federal agencies, to develop this training** in consultation with a panel of mental health professionals, child welfare advocates, former foster youth, foster and adoptive parents, and other experts in the field.
- **Mandate the training module be updated by the mental health professional panel** (see above) every three years to ensure it reflects current best practices and evidence-based approaches designed to meet the unique needs of this population.



Adapted from Center for Health Care Strategies (Children in Foster Care: Behavioral Health Care Use in Medicaid, 2014.)

# POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER TRAINING FOR FOSTER AND KINSHIP PARENTS

By Nyomi Davis

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To better support foster youth and foster parents and ensure more successful and stable placements, Congress should amend and reintroduce the Trauma-Informed Care Act (S. 774) to include 1) a federally mandatory minimum of 25 hours of pre-foster parent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) training and 2) allocate resources to provide effective trauma-informed therapy for youth while in their placement.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The majority of youth in foster care have experienced at least one traumatic event leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to either time spent with their birth family or while in foster care. Yet, most foster parents and kinship placements do not receive adequate training specific to caretaking for youth with PTSD. This lack of training contributes to placement instability as it increases the likelihood that youth will have to move foster homes due to lack of connection. A federally mandated PTSD education training program must be developed and required of all foster and kinship parents to train and educate them on how to best support youth with PTSD.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I entered the foster care system at the age of six after my mom passed away, was thereafter reunited with my father, and then re-entered at the age of 16. I experienced abuse and neglect from my father and stepmother for years which led to my diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD). I was initially misdiagnosed with depression and anxiety and incorrectly medicated due to the lack of knowledge of CPTSD and correlation to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse and neglect.

The abuse ultimately resulted in separation from my siblings and re-entering the foster care system. I was placed, along with one of my brothers, with a friend's family where we stayed for just under two years. My foster parents had children of their own, including a daughter my age, with whom I was very close.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

Despite having known us prior to our placement and having an awareness of the trauma we had previously experienced, the situation progressively became contentious. My new caregivers struggled with my younger brother's and my own resistance towards authority. Admittedly, I did not think I needed to be parented since I had been raising myself and my siblings for years. I now know much of my attitude resulted from my past trauma and lack of stable connections – something my foster parents did not have the training to recognize or the tools to manage.

Over time, my trauma also brought out unresolved trauma within my foster parents' family. We found ourselves constantly triggering (i.e., stimulus, oftentimes from trauma, that causes a reaction) each other, which eventually led us to group therapy. Through therapy, it became clear that our traumas overlapped and exacerbated one another, and that our foster parents felt exploited and unprepared to foster my brother and I, despite their best intentions. While we all cared about each other, the placement deteriorated quickly. I ultimately had to move out on my own just a month before aging out of the foster care system at the age of 18.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) education and training is vital to ensure foster care placements are as successful as possible. 90% of youth who enter foster care have experienced a traumatic event in their lives (Dorsey, et al., 2008). Importantly, all youth placed into care share one traumatic experience: the removal from their family and the experience of displacement. This alone can lead to trust and behavioral issues for the vast majority of foster youth, compounded by additional traumas that oftentimes led to their removal in the first place. Thus, for placements to be as stable and healthy as possible, all foster parents should be required to complete extensive trauma-informed training to bolster long-lasting caregiving arrangements. In 2021, a qualitative study found that foster youth behavior was the number one contributing factor to a foster parent's stress, and the more stressed a foster parent became, the more likely they were to terminate their caregiving role (Mancinelli, et al., 2021).

Relationships with caregivers are key to providing a sense of belonging to youth whose lives have been completely chaotic. When foster parents are unprepared to care for youth with significant trauma, this can lead to feelings of overwhelm and the cultivation of a negative outlook on fostering.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Across the United States, 30-50% of foster parents do not continue to foster after one year due to feelings of unpreparedness and lack of support (DeGarmo, 2017). While there is a federal requirement that foster parents receive basic training prior to placement, there is no mandate requiring that training include education on PTSD. As a result, there is tremendous variation state-by-state as to what resources, if any, are offered to caregivers in order to effectively support youth struggling with PTSD. For example, Alabama requires 30 hours of Trauma-Informed Partnering for Safety and Permanence (TIPS) before being approved to become a foster parent, whereas Arizona only requires a mere six hours of training on basic caregiving skills and other requirements related to the care of foster youth, without any curriculum related trauma or PTSD (State Foster Care Parent Trainings, n.d).

**FOSTER  
YOUTH ARE  
TWO TIMES  
AS LIKELY TO  
SUFFER FROM  
PTSD AS WAR  
VETERANS.**



*Adapted from The Battery (The Battery, 2021).*

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2017, then-Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota introduced the Trauma-Informed Care Act (S. 774), which sought to implement trauma-informed training for school and court personnel and medical providers (Trauma-Informed Care Act, 2017). While this bill takes positive steps towards prioritizing trauma-informed training for those who come into regular contact with youth, it should be expanded to include the foster parents and caregivers within the child welfare system. To better support foster youth and foster parents and ensure more successful and stable placements, Congress should amend and reintroduce the Trauma-Informed Care Act to include:

- **A federally mandatory minimum of 25 hours of pre-foster parent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) training**, to be renewed once a year. The training must be updated every two years to reflect best practices. The training 1) should be developed by the Children's Bureau in consultation with young lived experts, foster parents, and mental health professionals who are trained to support foster youth with PTSD; 2) will include education on what PTSD is, how it is different with youth, the difference between CPTSD and PTSD, what PTSD reactions and triggers are and look like, and how they differ depending on the youth, as well as other relevant information; and 3) must address trauma reactions associated with PTSD and provide foster parents the tools to work through and recognize these behaviors.
- **Allocate additional resources to provide effective trauma-informed therapy for youth** while in their placement.

# EXTENDING RESOURCES TO ADOPTED AND REUNIFIED FOSTER YOUTH: HELPING YOUTH ACHIEVE PERMANENCY

*By Jessica Herrera Twitchell*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

**To better support adopted and reunified youth access to critical supports for post-secondary education, Congress should 1) expand the Foster Connections to Success Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 to allow youth ages 16 to 18 in all states who have been adopted or reunified to participate in extended foster care, ensuring every former foster youth has the opportunity to reach college regardless of permanency status and 2) extend the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program to allow youth ages 13 to 18 to participate, so that youth in the system have equitable access to education.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adequate financial resources are essential to completing post-secondary education, but the vast majority of youth with child welfare system involvement do not have access to these critical supports after permanency. As a result, adolescent foster youth often make choices about possible adoption/reunification or, alternatively, aging out of care in order to retain access to financial support for post-secondary education. Sufficient financial support to ensure the completion of post-secondary education should be guaranteed to all foster youth, regardless of whether or not they have been adopted, reunified, or aged out of care. This is critical to promote stability and permanency for foster youth presented with adoption and reunification opportunities who, despite the promise of permanency, may choose to age out of foster care in order to reap financial benefits associated with it.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

Growing up in the child welfare system, I worried about whether I could obtain a college degree because I feared I would never be able to afford it. I became even more concerned when I realized the possibility of being adopted could jeopardize even the limited resources available for me as a system-involved youth. While I knew being adopted might provide me with more long-term stability, I knew that college would present a financial burden for my foster family.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)**

I found myself feeling like I had to choose between adoption and going to college. As a result, I opted to stay in the system and aged out of foster care at 18 rather than being adopted. This experience – the painstaking feeling of choosing between a permanent family or a post-secondary education – has been reinforced by stories I have heard from other students who are part of the Bruin Guardian Scholars Program, a foster youth support program at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) with which I am involved.



*I found myself feeling like I had to choose between adoption and going to college.*

**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW**

Adoption and reunification have economic implications for adoptees and adoptive families. Permanency is meant to provide stability, but oftentimes does not. For adopted families and youth, it often means they are no longer eligible for federal services and resources, including support for pursuing post-secondary education. Yet the data makes clear that resources are needed to support post-secondary education for youth regardless of permanency status: 93% of parents rely on adoption subsidies and/or vital post-adoption services to help meet youths' varied, and often costly, needs including but not limited to education (AFCARS, 2021). This suggests that there is a critical need for continued financial assistance post-adoption. This reality becomes increasingly important in regard to education, where it is estimated that only six percent of foster youth graduate from college (Courtney et al., 2011).

To date, two federal laws are devoted to supporting foster youth to achieve post-secondary education: the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) and Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

The Chafee Educational and Training Vouchers (ETVs) provide youth with financial assistance for post-secondary services, such as obtaining a high school diploma, post-secondary education, career exploration, housing, and vocational training (ACF, 2012). As ETVs are discretionary funds, some states grant a \$5,000 lump sum while others provide a monthly stipend. Some states allow youth to be adopted between the ages of 16 and 18 and still qualify for ETVs. However, this exception is not a requirement in all states. As a result, youth who are adopted or reunified at an early age miss out on this critical education benefit that, in many cases, would make all the difference for families already under financial strain.

Similarly, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gave states the option of extending foster care to age 21, which in turn expanded benefits while in care beyond the age of 18 and proved to have a positive impact on college attendance for foster youth. It is estimated that each year a foster youth stays in extended foster care, their probability of going to college increases between 5%-12% (Courtney, 2018). Studies also show that one additional year in foster care increases the likelihood of enrolling in college by ten percent and adds an average of \$404 to personal financial savings (Courtney, 2021). However, since the ability to extend foster care is left up to the states, not all youth are granted the opportunity to capitalize on these resources. While some states, like Alabama, extend eligibility for these resources to any foster youth who was in the system between the age of 16 and 18, other states condition eligibility on a youth aging out at the age of 18. In only 33 states, foster youth are allowed to return to the system anywhere between the ages of 18 and 21 (Children's Bureau, 2022). Even fewer states allow youth who are adopted between the ages of 18 and 21 to remain benefits eligible.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support adopted and reunified youth access critical supports for post-secondary education, Congress should:

- **Expand the Foster Connections to Success Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008** to allow youth ages 16 to 18 in all states who have been adopted or reunified to participate in extended foster care, ensuring every former foster youth has the opportunity to reach college regardless of permanency status.
- **Extend the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program** to allow youth ages 13 to 18 to participate, so that youth in the system have equitable access to education.

# THE NEED TO REPLACE CONGREGATE “CARE” WITH CARING KINSHIP PLACEMENTS

*By Jamarri Kane-White*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To help families stay together through kinship caregivers, Congress should 1) create a kinship caregiver tax credit to allow more kin caregivers to care for children outside of the child welfare system and prevent the need for foster care, 2) build on the reforms made by the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 and further restrict group care settings under the Title IV-E program, and 3) promote models like DC127, which support grandparents and other kin caregivers to keep children out of the foster care system.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although Congress has taken steps to prioritize kinship care, our system continues to favor congregate care over kinship placements. Kinship care can prevent children from being placed in foster care. Foster care should be considered a last resort option, and more is needed to ensure that children can be placed with members of their own families to prevent the need for foster care in the first place. To give more youth the chance to stay with their families and out of foster care, Congress should increase financial support for kin caregivers and decrease support for group care.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I entered foster care because my family was financially unable to take me in, even though they wanted to. Once I entered foster care, I had seven different placements, including a negative experience in a group home. A group home is a type of congregate care, a residential community of youth in foster care.

From my perspective, the group home I was placed in could be described as “hell on earth.” It was filled with arbitrary rules and emotionally cold. We were not allowed to participate in normal teenage activities, like watching TV or playing video games. We slept two to a room and were only provided financial assistance if we finished rudimentary life skills training. The staff was disengaged and not active in their care for us. It was not a home for me, nor the other foster youth. It was truly just housing.



## PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

I had no intention of going to college but given the horrid living conditions in the group home, my attitude changed my senior year. I decided that I would do whatever it took to get anywhere else. I believed that at least in college, there would be more support. My determination to move out of this group home fueled my academic performance, and my hard work and grades granted me a full scholarship to Howard University. Out of the ten boys in my group home, only two of us attended college.

My experience is not unique. There is increasing documentation of the negative experiences of living in group home placements. A report of recounted lived experiences by Think of Us states, “they said I was in that facility because I was deemed to be a danger to myself or others...But I was the one being abused and locked in rooms. I still carry that feeling of blame with me today. What we do to children in the system now, lives on with them tomorrow and in the years to come” (Fathallah & Sullivan, 2021). I resonate with this quote deeply. I will never forget the first day I arrived in a congregate care setting. A fight unfolded before I got my last trash bag of belongings through the door. These violent occurrences started becoming the norm. We are putting bandaids on bullet holes by giving foster youth a place to be housed in congregate care and not a permanent, loving home with family.



## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

More than 2.5 million children are living in kinship care arrangements at any given time, both in and out of the child welfare system (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Kin caregivers are usually called upon unexpectedly to step in and take care of kids without any advance planning. This can present a huge financial burden. This places even more of a burden on poor families and communities. There are very few supports available for kinship caregivers to access if they need help. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is one of the best sources of support for kin caregivers outside of the foster care system. However, only 12% of kinship caregivers receive TANF funding (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). This study also found that housing support was received by only 6% of voluntary kinship caregivers and 9% of formal kinship caregivers and just over half of voluntary and formal kinship caregivers receive food assistance.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (*CONTINUED*)

Our child welfare system continues to favor out-of-home placements with strangers in foster care and institutional or group care placements. For the most part, Title IV-E, the largest source of federal funding for child welfare, is available only for youth who have been removed and placed into foster care rather than with kin. Congress took big bold steps to limit group care placements in the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (Family First) and created a new category of group care called Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTP) designed to improve the quality of group care. However, five years into implementation, young people have not seen huge changes previously promised by the law (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2023). Family First also included provisions to increase support for kin caregivers by providing limited federal funding for Kinship Navigator Programs through Title IV-E prevention. All to say, implementation has been slow and inconsistent.

An effective local program designed to support kin caregivers and keep children out of foster care whenever safely possible is through DC127. This organization provides wraparound services to parents and grandparents in the District of Columbia who are isolated, overwhelmed, and under-resourced (DC127 Approach, 2023). This program serves as a model for more local initiatives that provide wraparound support.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that over 40% of youth in congregate care did not have a clinical reason for placement in the acute setting (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). At minimum, 10% of all youth in each state are in institutional homes. In some states, the percentage of youth in institutions is over 30% (Sullivan & Fathallah, 2021). On April 29, 2020, Cornelius Fredericks, a 16-year-old black teenager in foster care, screamed, “I can’t breathe,” as several staff used a prone restraint on him for ten minutes, all because he threw a sandwich in a Michigan group care facility (Estate of Cornelius Fredericks vs. Lakeside for Children, 2021). Reports indicate that Cornelius was originally placed in institutional care because of post-traumatic stress disorder following the traumatic death of his mother. Contrary to general practice, emerging research indicates it is precisely those youth who have experienced adverse childhood experiences who need relationships cultivated in family-based settings most urgently (Fathallah & Sullivan, 2021). Institutional settings cost ten times more than the cost of placing a child with kin. The costs increase even more when children receive additional mental health services or are placed into group settings out of their state of residence. Fathallah & Sullivan also found that in 2019, the state of Michigan where Cornelius Fredericks lived, spent over \$95 million to institutionalize youth. The alarm is being raised that youth are dying in these institutional placements and yet, they continue to be funded.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To help families stay together through kinship caregivers, Congress should:

- **Create a kinship caregiver tax credit** to allow more kin caregivers to care for children outside of the child welfare system and prevent the need for foster care.
- **Build on the reforms made by the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018** and further restrict group care settings under the Title IV-E program.
- **Promote models like DC127**, which support grandparents and other kin caregivers to keep children out of the foster care system.

# IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES AMONG FOSTER YOUTH

*By Aoguzi Muhammet McDonald*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

In order to increase the amount of foster youth graduating college, Congress should 1) create a new federal grant program similar to the Federal Pell Grant, specifically for current or former foster youth, which is to be sent directly to the institution of attendance and applied to the cost of tuition, 2) create a federal pamphlet and/or training system outlining available educational resources through the U.S. Department of Education, with information regarding various issues and questions, to be distributed to both foster parents and youth alike across the country, and 3) federally mandate an expansion of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Only between three and four percent of foster youth graduate from four-year institutions. This is a problem given the importance a college degree plays in the ability of young adults to obtain financial stability and social mobility. In order to increase the amount of foster youth graduating college, the federal government should implement a new college grant, mandate educational training amongst foster parents, and provide guidance to states to create programs that are tasked with engaging one-on-one with youth to help them transition into adulthood.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I had to go above and beyond the average student to ensure academic success, drawing on personal perseverance and benefitting from certain fortunate circumstances. I am lucky to have been born to biological parents who were highly educated; therefore, from a very young age, they instilled the importance of education. I held tight onto this value when I entered the foster care system at the age of 11. I worked hard to seek out access to educational resources despite dealing with the challenges that come with being a foster child. I took it upon myself to transfer to a better school system which was critical to my academic success.

### PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

I researched colleges extensively and, with very little guidance or support, found that some schools cover 100% of the cost of attendance for independent students, which includes youth who have experienced foster care. In high school, I strove to take difficult courses whenever possible and took classes at colleges when my high school did not offer them. These efforts ultimately resulted in my ability to attend and graduate from Georgetown University. However, I recognize that I was at an advantage compared to many foster youth given my upbringing with highly educated parents. In reality, most foster youth lack knowledge about the importance of secondary education and are not offered the resources to pursue it.

### THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

The vast majority of foster youth do not attain post-secondary education despite the fact that such a degree has become necessary for future success in many parts of this country. Today, only three to four percent of foster youth obtain a four-year degree, compared to more than one-third of the overall population (National Foster Youth Institute, 2022). This severely low rate of college attendance among foster youth has far reaching consequences. For example, potentially as a result or related outcome of low college attendance, only half of all foster youth will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24, and a fifth of foster youth at age eighteen will become homeless (Gaille, 2017). We now live in a society where a college degree is a key driver of financial stability, such that the absence of the opportunity to attend an institution of higher learning can severely undermine one's ability to become a stable adult. Increasing the number of foster youth enrolled in college will help ensure that more foster youth are capable of finding housing, landing a stable job, and becoming successful young adults.

Currently, there is no direct federal grant for supporting college attendance for under-resourced populations other than the Federal Pell Grant (Pell Grant), which is available to all who qualify based on their Expected Family Contribution (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The Pell Grant is targeted towards the general low-income population, with no distinction for foster youth. Given the large tuition amount colleges require, averaging at \$35,720 (Bouchrika, 2023). Therefore, the Pell Grant is not sufficient to meet the financial need in attending college for foster youth, who often have no family who can help contribute to the cost of attendance.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

There is no federal guarantee of support for post-secondary education for foster youth and as a result, there are significant disparities between states' approach to supporting this population. While the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) provides \$143 million annually to some foster youth, current regulations prevent this funding from reaching every foster youth in need of additional support. The purpose of the program is to aid states in their efforts to help foster youth attend post-secondary institutions while providing broad guidance on how states may implement the grants. Thus, as the law now stands, after submitting a five-year plan detailing how it will meet the goals asked by Chafee, the state is eligible to receive funding for distribution. Some states may use Chafee dollars to provide direct financial support to youth, others may spend it to hire more social workers for the purpose of helping youth navigate the college process. Only 32 states elect to provide Chafee up until a youth is 23 years old (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2021), while others cut off aid once a youth turns 21, which disadvantages many who are still in college during that time.

With so much state-by-state latitude with respect to the implementation of Chafee, significant disparities exist among youth across the country. However, state exemplars can serve as models for the development of federal standard that expands the existing Chafee program so that all youth are able to access the resources they need to pursue their goals – educational or otherwise: for example, the Massachusetts Outreach (MA Outreach) program employs social workers to serve the sole task of aiding in the transition to adulthood. Once a foster youth turns sixteen, they are assigned an outreach worker who will meet with them on a monthly basis, sometimes weekly, to go over the progress of the youth in transitioning to adulthood. Social workers are equipped with knowledge of all higher education grants and other resources (e.g., employment tools) available to youth, equipped with an extensive understanding of the college process. Social workers on the MA Outreach team are also responsible for providing Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) to youth, which based on the state can help offset non-traditional education-related costs such as driving courses.

*While Chafee funding provides*

**\$143 million**



*annually to some foster youth, current regulations prevent this funding from reaching every foster youth in need of additional support.*



*The Massachusetts Outreach program employs social workers to serve the sole task of aiding in the transition to adulthood...*

*Social workers are equipped with knowledge of all higher education grants and other resources (e.g., employment tools) available to youth, equipped with an extensive understanding of the college process.*

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to increase the amount of foster youth graduating college, Congress should:

- **Create a new federal grant program similar to the Federal Pell Grant**, specifically for current or former foster youth, which is to be sent directly to the institution of attendance and applied to the cost of tuition. This grant must be greater than the Federal Pell Grant amount to account for chronic underfunding and under-resourcing of supports for families involved in the foster care system, while increasing annually to match the growth in the average cost of attending college.
- **Create a federal pamphlet and/or training system outlining available educational resources through the U.S. Department of Education**, with information regarding various issues and questions, which will be distributed to both foster parents and youth alike across the country. The packet should detail key facts that are not widely known by foster youth, such as the list of colleges that will meet 100% of the financial need of students, or the available secondary education choices within their communities.
- **Federally mandate an expansion of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood** (Chafee), based on successful models such as Massachusetts Outreach, where states are required to have within their Chafee request a detailed case management plan equipped with social workers who specialize in transition-age foster youth. The federal government should also issue guidance that these specialized social workers should be equipped with detailed knowledge regarding the college process for foster youth in order to connect them to available resources.

# AN EXAMINATION OF THE PIPELINE BETWEEN FOSTER CARE AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*By Eunice Mejiadeu*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

**To better support youth in the child welfare system who are at-risk of or current victims of trafficking, the federal government must 1) provide technical assistance and other support to states to include proper trafficking screening training for child welfare agencies and 2) amend Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to ensure that children involved in the child welfare system are appointed an attorney.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children and youth with a history of maltreatment, sexual abuse, low self-esteem, and minimal social support are more susceptible to sex trafficking. Unsurprisingly, over sixty percent of child sex trafficking victims have spent time in the child welfare system. The failure of the child welfare system is a federal and state issue. Therefore, the federal government should strengthen the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to incentivize states to establish screening provisions for trafficking within the child welfare system and amend CAPTA to incorporate child representatives or children-specific attorneys nationwide to ensure all children are educated about their rights and responsibilities in the child welfare system.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I was eight years old when I first entered foster care. However, my interaction with the child welfare system began at five years old when I first reported the clear abuse and neglect I had endured at the hands of the men in my life. For each subsequent abuse report, a different case worker arrived equipped with no trauma-informed training and approached visits with various blanket solutions.





### PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

At the time, I was told that Child Protective Service (CPS) could not interfere since there were no physical bruises. As a child, I could not communicate that the bruises were internal and external, located across my lower body which was covered by the clothes I received as payment for my silence. Because I claimed physical abuse and did not understand what sexual abuse was, I was never screened. When social services finally conducted a routine house check, they were met with lies from traumatized children and a narcissistic parent in a house that was not theirs and clothes that obscured reality. I was never asked why this was my tenth school in the last year, my dozenth report to CPS, or why I, a five-year-old, would want to be removed from her only parent. With every CPS call my father received, I would be beaten into silence in a new community in a new town. An endless cycle of placements – kinship and foster – would end back in the home with him, allowing the abuse and exploitation to continue. At the time, I thought that human trafficking was a strange man kidnapping me in a white van; I did not believe it was something that happened in the homes of family members or friends that had agreed to take me in or after church services or in the homes of babysitters, where I was made the star for their cameras and guests. No adult believed a child's words, so I continued to be exploited and trafficked by those around me.

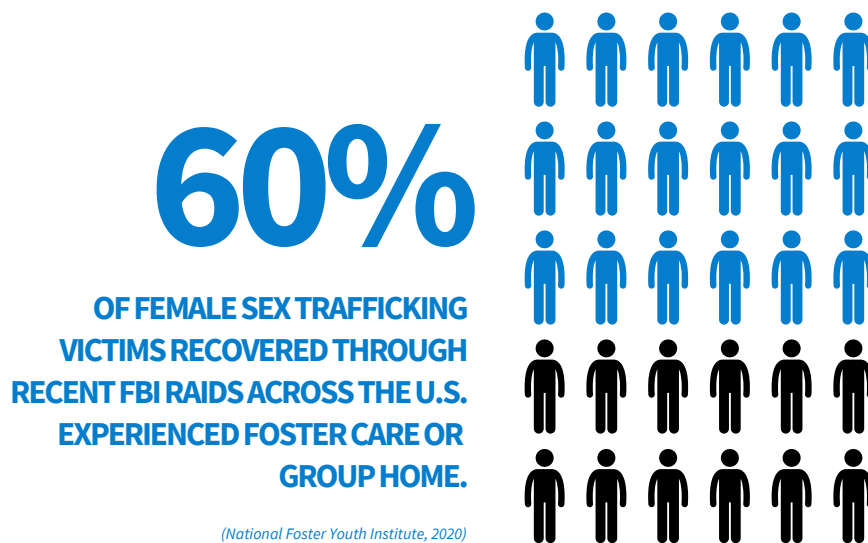
### THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Children and youth with a history of maltreatment, sexual abuse, low self-esteem, and minimal social support are more susceptible to sex trafficking (NCSSLE, n.d.). Sixty percent of child sex trafficking victims have spent time in the child welfare system, where Black and LGBTQ youth are disproportionately more likely to be represented (OPRE, 2022). However, the data surrounding missing and exploited children, both in care and out, are limited (OPRE, 2022). A key reason for this absence of data is the various definitions of trafficking related to child abuse and neglect across the United States. For example, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) defines trafficking differently across state lines: in states like Illinois, sex trafficking is a subcategory under human trafficking, excluding the metric from NCAND (OPRE, 2022). The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015 (JVTA) expanded the Child Abuse Prevention Act (CAPTA) conditions by mandating a state's CAPTA plan to include provisions for identifying sex trafficking. However, since states categorize and define trafficking differently, child welfare workers' identification, assessment, and training continue to differ from state to state (OPRE, 2022).

**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)**

While trafficking on the federal level is currently defined as the "recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion" (DOJ, 2023), state definitions for trafficking are not required to include transportation, force, or coercion when a minor is involved.

Sixteen percent of youth victims of sex trafficking report that they had no one to confide in (OPRE, 2022), suggesting much more needs to be done to ensure youth trafficked have adequate support and a safe way for their voices to be heard. Chief Attorney for the Legal Aid Society in New York, Dawne Mitchell, describes her work as a direct child representative (CR) – an attorney – and details the difference between her role as a Guardian-Ad Litem (GAL): namely, child representatives who uniquely represent children as if they were adult clients (D. Mitchell, personal communication). In states like Illinois, these child representatives are called “attorneys for the child,” acting as private lawyers for children and adhering to strict confidentiality agreements. The benefits of these programs were highlighted in a 2016 study performed by the University of Michigan and the National Quality Improvement Center on the Representation of Children in the Child Welfare System, which examined the role of direct representation for children in states like Georgia and Washington State. The researchers found “lawyers who practiced according to the QIC Model did a better job representing the child and got improved results” (QIC-ChildRep, n.d.).



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support youth in the child welfare system who are at-risk of or current victims of trafficking, the federal government must:

- **Provide technical assistance and other support to states to include proper trafficking screening training for child welfare agencies.** Model tools for screening may include screening techniques created by the American Academy of Pediatrics (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021) or trafficking agencies.
- **Amend Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to ensure that children involved in the child welfare system are appointed an attorney.** This will also help to ensure that children are accurately informed about their rights as witnesses and victims of the child welfare system. Current law in CAPTA requires states to appoint a guardian ad litem (GAL) or an attorney “in every case involving a victim of abuse or neglect which results in a judicial proceeding” (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, 1974). Although GALs can be helpful, children deserve more rights in court and should be appointed an attorney. The role of the child representatives outlined by the Quality Improvement Center (QIC) and other national databases directly represents the child's wishes and actively engages the child in the decision-making process.

# AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT: AMPLIFYING YOUTH VOICES AND STRENGTHENING PERMANENT CONNECTIONS

By Idelia Chelsea Robinson-Confer

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To create a system that is more responsive and effective in meeting the unique needs of children, youth, and families involved in foster care, Congress should 1) embed youth engagement in federal agency decision-making by creating meaningful opportunities for youth with lived experience to advise federal agencies in their policy development and administration, 2) provide guidance and require states to ensure child welfare agencies engage youth in decision-making regarding their own lives and planning for their future, and 3) increase funding and support for mentoring programs specifically tailored to youth aging out of foster care that require collaboration with youth to identify potential permanent connections, including supportive adults, mentors, family, or chosen family members, who can offer ongoing guidance and support beyond the foster care system.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child welfare agencies often overlook the vital role of youth voices in developing policies, procedures, and programs. Youth who experience foster care need opportunities and resources to engage in decisions that affect their lives. In doing so, this helps build healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development and meaningful relationships with adults. I call on Congress and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to take action, expand opportunities to engage youth in decision-making, and provide specific funding to agencies to promote permanent connections. By developing permanent relationships and amplifying youth voices, we can give young people the guidance, resources, and opportunities necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.



*By developing permanent relationships and amplifying youth voices, we can give young people the guidance, resources, and opportunities necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.*

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

During my time in foster care, I experienced a lack of agency and autonomy, with numerous decisions made on my behalf without considering my input. It was challenging to advocate for myself due to the system's complexity. Legal terminology, limited opportunities to engage between court hearings, insufficient communication and knowledge of my rights, and power dynamics between the adults and myself created barriers to my engagement. The absence of personalized case planning failed to address my needs, which led to insufficient access to resources and information. After eight years in foster care, I aged out and found the transition from foster care to adulthood difficult. As a result, I struggled in early adulthood with decision-making, self-advocacy, emotional regulation, and building and maintaining relationships.

While healing from the trauma of my foster care experiences is ongoing work, I discovered that engaging in advocacy and access to supportive adults is instrumental to my growth. I am actively engaged in several efforts focused on child welfare, addressing youth homelessness, resource expansion, and improving economic mobility for young people. Through involvement with advocacy organizations, I have been provided a platform to share my unique perspectives, insights, and firsthand knowledge. These opportunities have allowed me to influence policies, practices, and services. It has given me a sense of agency, ownership, and the opportunity to make a difference. This helped me build confidence and develop leadership skills such as public speaking, research, and effective communication. Engaging in advocacy initiatives allowed me to establish relationships with adult partners and mentors, which I lacked when I aged out of foster care. These individuals have positively impacted my transition out of foster care by providing letters of recommendation, connecting me with resources in the community when I needed additional help, and serving as ongoing support that I turn to for advice and encouragement, and celebrating my achievements. These experiences positively contributed to my educational journey, career aspirations, and permanent relationships as these individuals continue to support me as I navigate my graduate degree and transition into adulthood.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Although the foster care system aims to provide a safe and supportive environment, it can adversely affect the well-being of children and youth. Many underlying issues such as trauma, lack of stability, isolation, and staff turnover impact youth engagement and interfere with them building permanent relationships. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical period for development and having opportunities to hone decision-making skills is essential. Yet, the child welfare system often fails to actively involve youth in decisions related to education, career planning, housing, and addressing mental and emotional needs.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

The child welfare system does not prioritize connecting youth in care to supportive adults who can support them in their personal transition to adulthood. Many young people exit care with fewer supportive relationships than when they entered care. Each year, approximately 19,000 individuals age out of foster care with a limited support network (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). The current outcomes of youth aging out include a higher risk of housing instability, involvement with the criminal justice system, mental health challenges, and financial insecurity. This demonstrates the current approaches do not work to ensure youth are connected and prepared. By providing opportunities for youth to share their preferences, and aspirations and cultivate permanent connections, we can ensure proper support is in place prior to the transition into adulthood.

Congress has taken action to improve outcomes for young people who experience foster care through the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which created the John H. Chafee Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee). The Chafee program mandates that states involve youth in services for their transition into adulthood. Other federal legislation such as the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 and Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 also build upon this and ensure agencies consult with youth in foster care aged 14 and older in their case and transition plans (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). However, these policies are not being implemented in a meaningful way. It is crucial to ensure that youth are actively involved in case planning to ensure the system effectively serves its intended purpose. Implementing lived experience helps identify the patterns, behaviors, and barriers youth face while in foster care.

Authentic youth engagement should take place on two distinct levels. First, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019a), authentic youth engagement occurs when caseworkers actively involve young people early on and throughout their case planning, empowering them to lead discussions about their futures and treating them as equal partners. This partnership between adults and youth allows young people the autonomy to make age-appropriate decisions about their lives with an adult's input when appropriate. Second, authentic youth engagement ensures lived experience in decision-making, program design, and policy development. This should include equal collaboration and listening, learning, and sharing power. The benefits of youth engagement include skills development such as reasoning, decision-making, self-regulation, self-esteem, leadership, and professional development (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Authentic youth engagement promotes youth-adult partnerships and collaboration.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

By implementing these policies, Congress and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services can actively involve individuals with lived experience in policy development and processes to reflect young people's needs in the child welfare system. The federal government should:

- **Embed youth engagement in federal agency decision-making** by creating meaningful opportunities for youth with lived experience to advise federal agencies in their policy development and administration.
- **Provide guidance and require states to ensure child welfare agencies engage youth** in decision-making regarding their own lives and planning for their future.
- **Increase funding and support for mentoring programs** specifically tailored to youth aging out of foster care that require collaboration with youth to identify potential permanent connections, including supportive adults, mentors, family, or chosen family members, who can offer ongoing guidance and support beyond the foster care system.

# WHAT IF OUR LETTERS WERE RIGHT: THE GRAVITY OF PRESERVING SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN FOSTER CARE

*By Isabel N. Rodriguez*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To help prevent the separation of siblings in out-of-home placements, Congress should 1) pass the Protecting Sibling Relationships in Foster Care Act (H.R. 755), 2) build on the reforms in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 by creating new incentives for states and child welfare agencies to expand recruitment of foster families for large sibling groups and retain these homes for large sibling groups, and 3) request a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report that examines the current state of sibling separation within the foster care system.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

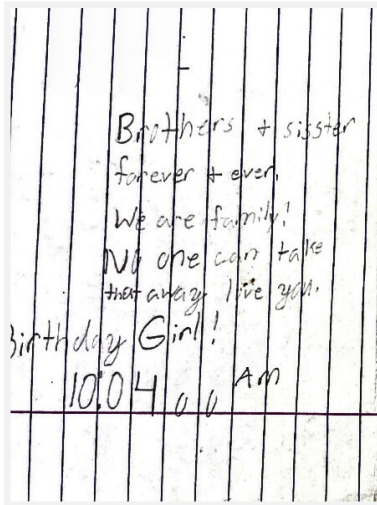
Of the approximately 440,000 children in foster care, around 75% are separated from their sibling(s) (Smith, 2021). The trauma of being removed from one's parents is exacerbated when followed by the separation from one's sibling. Sibling relationships are some of the longest lasting connections that people will have in their lifetimes (Barbell, 1995), and the current foster care system denies this reality to thousands of youth. Research shows that joint sibling placements improve outcomes for foster youth by lowering placement disruptions, decreasing emotional and behavioral challenges, improving mental well-being, and increasing the likelihood of achieving permanency (Brown, 2020). It is critical that Congress acknowledge the gravity of preventing sibling separation by taking new actions to ensure that foster youth have access to life-long relationships with their siblings.

*“Our parents leave us too early. Our spouse and our children come along too late. Our siblings are the only ones who are with us for the entire ride.”*

*- Jeffery Kluger, Editor At Large, Time Magazine*



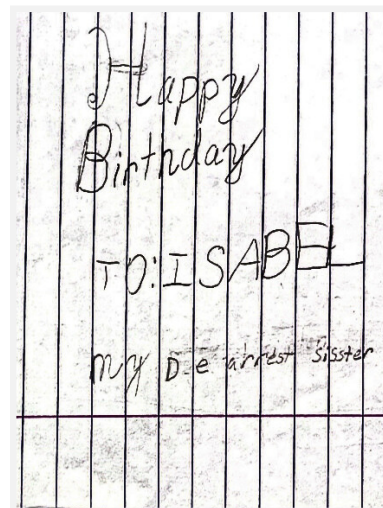
## PERSONAL REFLECTION



At age 13, I was placed in foster care and immediately separated from my siblings. We were forced to live in separate homes across the state of Michigan, and this physical separation strained our strong bonds and sibling relationships. The bond we had as children was taken from us – destroyed because the child welfare system did not do enough to protect it. Though I repeatedly tried to communicate with my brother, my requests were denied. It wasn't until four years after we had entered foster care that I was finally allowed to meet my brother. We had grown so far apart by this point that we no longer felt like we were reuniting with a loved one. Rather, we both felt as if we were meeting a stranger that the world believed was our sibling.

I got to meet my brother again in November of last year. It was perhaps the most challenging moment of my life. Though I had helped raise him as a child, he told me he felt so conflicted with our relationship that he could not call me his sister. Silverstein and Smith, two researchers on sibling relationships, wrote about sibling separations stating, “even with later reunion, the damage may indeed be so deep as to prevent complete healing for the sibling relationship” (2008). This was our fate. I sat across from a person who could have been a life-long best friend and had to accept that though we once wrote letters to each other declaring this system could not tear us apart as siblings, it had.

It has been nearly seven years since we were separated, and I struggle every day because no one helped assure I would maintain meaningful connections with my siblings. I will have to spend the rest of my life accepting that this relationship does not exist for me in the same way it did as a child. I believe that the child welfare system has the capacity to ensure that no other child will ever have to say to their sibling that they are so conflicted with their relationship that they cannot bring themselves to call them “brother” or “sister.”



## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Approximately over 75% of foster youth are separated from their siblings in care (Smith, 2021). Said differently, there are 300,000 kids in foster care who are in placements without their siblings. The separation of children from parents, while warranted at times, is traumatizing. However, it should not be forgotten that the subsequent separation from siblings creates further trauma for our most vulnerable youth. Research shows that sibling separation causes harm to identity development, self-esteem, and sense of belonging (Children's Bureau, 2019). For kids in foster care, sibling separation also has a detrimental impact on permanency, because they are significantly more likely to experience placement disruption (Chen, 2020).

Sibling relationships are some of the longest lasting connections that people will have in their lifetimes (Barbell, 1995). Many people go every day with the unconscious expectation that their sibling(s) will be there for a lifetime, but foster youth have to wonder daily if they will ever see their sibling again. Sometimes, we are forced to realize we will never share that connection with someone again. In order to exit the foster care system having long-term supports, the sacred sibling connections of these youth must never be replaced in lieu of external aid.

Congress has recognized the importance of sibling relationships with the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (U.S. DHHS, 2010). This law supported sibling connections by allowing IV-E agencies to claim administrative costs associated with maintaining sibling connections (U.S. DHHS, 2010:30). This policy alone is not enough.

Some states have made strides to foster and maintain strong sibling relationships. For example, New Jersey has been able to place approximately 80% of siblings together (Casey Family Programs, 2022) by recruiting foster families that are willing and able to care for large sibling groups. New Jersey does this by utilizing a retainer fee to ensure that those homes remain available for sibling groups and provide peer support for those families (N.J. DCF, n.d.). New Jersey has also stressed the importance of keeping families together and have increased their efforts to place children with a relative caregiver (Blake, 2017).

Congress must not allow a system under their jurisdiction to sever some of the most meaningful relationships a child could ever have. There is enough trauma and developmental damage done when a child is removed from their parents, and there is far more work to do to prevent the exacerbation of this trauma by separating siblings. The government is the parent for foster youth and has the duty to protect and nurture relationships of such profound significance.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To help prevent the separation of siblings in out-of-home placements, Congress should:

- **Pass the Protecting Sibling Relationships in Foster Care Act (H.R. 755)**, which would require the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services to develop a pilot grant program to establish a specialized foster care program for large sibling groups.
- **Build on the reforms in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008** by creating new incentives for states and child welfare agencies to expand recruitment of foster families for large sibling groups and retain these homes for large sibling groups.
- **Request a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report** that examines the current state of sibling separation within the foster care system. This report should consider:
  - how many youth have been or currently are separated from their siblings and reasons given to the court to justify separation,
  - key barriers that prevent joint-sibling placements,
  - the long-term effects on children and young people as a result of sibling separation,
  - best practices for keeping siblings together in foster care, and
  - recommendations for the federal government to keep more siblings together.

# PREVENTATIVE MEASURES FOR CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT WITHIN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

*By Kayleen Shapiro*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

**To ensure youth in foster care do not suffer more abuse after being removed from their families and placed into care, Congress must 1) provide every child in foster care with access to legal representation by an attorney, 2) request a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report to learn more about abuse while in foster care, and 3) expand federal funding to establish Ombudsman’s offices in every state to improve the safety of youth in foster care.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A harsh reality our nation faces is that innocent children experience abuse inside the child welfare system daily. At the federal level, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines child abuse and neglect as "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm." Children have a right to feel safe, protected, and cared for by the government. This issue must be addressed urgently.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

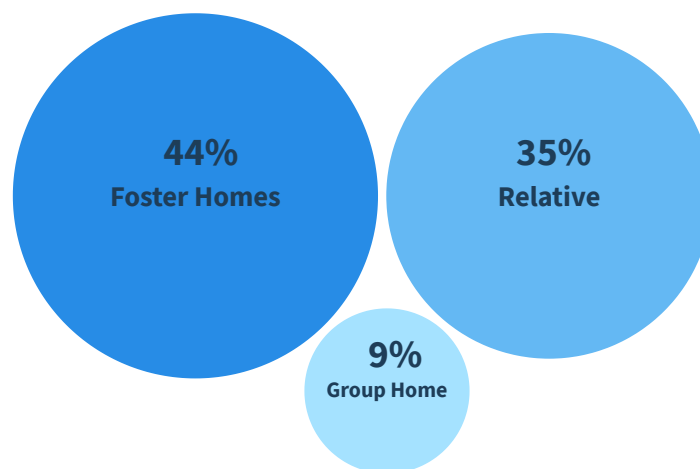
I was fostered into, and then adopted by, a loving home at the age of two. I recognize that I am one of the “lucky ones,” and I want that same outcome for every child who enters foster care. Unfortunately, many children and youth in foster care experience abuse and neglect within their placements. Children should be focused on learning their multiplication tables, building warm friendships, and laughing with loved ones. Children should not be concerned with protecting themselves when they go to sleep. The system oftentimes prioritizes profit over well-being. More children need to be placed into safe and nurturing environments. I will keep striving for change until safety and security is experienced by all children in the foster care system.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

At any given time, there are around 400,000 children in foster care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). The Foundation's Kids Count study also found that 44% of these children are placed in foster homes, 35% are placed with a relative, and 9% are placed in a group home. The system promises their safety, permanency, and well-being.

Although data related to abuse while in foster care is limited, research has revealed it is more common than one might expect. A recent study conducted by John Hopkins University found that foster youth in Maryland were four times as likely to be sexually abused than their non-foster peers, and children in group homes were 28 times more likely to be abused (Focus for Health Foundation, 2020). The same study found that in Oregon and Washington state, at least one third of foster children report abuse by a foster parent or other adult within the home. This study also reported the New Jersey Office of Child Advocacy found within cases of abuse in foster care, 37.4% of perpetrators were institutional staff, 36.5% were foster parents, and 20% were relatives of the victim. Regarding children who were abused and neglected while in foster care, three out of every four victims in foster care suffered neglect, 16% were physically abused, 9% were sexually assaulted, 6% were mentally abused, and 2% were medically neglected (Savini, 2022).

### The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Study Placements for the Approx. 400,000 Youth in Care



**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)**

Caylon Brown, a victim of child abuse in the foster care system, said "it is not common for a kid to catch a [sexually transmitted disease] STD as young as I did; I caught my first STD when I was five" (Savini, 2022). Children should be focused on just being a kids, and not worrying about is the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. This statement encompasses regular abuse within our system. According to a recent CBS news report, between the years of 2016 and 2021, there were more than 6,000 abuse and neglect allegations against 32,000 foster parents (Savini, 2022). The same report presented evidence that 91% of allegations that involved physical harm were deemed unfounded by investigators and that allegations relating to sexual abuse were deemed unfounded 88% of the time. In many instances, it takes weeks for a child welfare agency representative to visit a reported home. In the interim, that child is potentially subjected to more abuse. It is hard to imagine abuse occurring at the hands of people who are supposed to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth in their care. To help attract qualified individuals to become foster parents, individual states have their own licensing and screening standards for prospective foster parents (US GAO, 2016).

Some states have taken steps to protect children who are in foster care by establishing Ombudsman offices designed to investigate abuse and apply pressure to the child welfare agencies to address systemic issues. Many of these Ombudsman offices are independent from the child welfare system while others are housed within, presenting a conflict of interest. At least 15 states have passed a version of the Foster Children Bill of Rights, which outlines key rights that youth have while in care (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019).

Perhaps the most impactful reform states have implemented to protect children from abuse in foster care has been providing children with an attorney. At least 16 states have taken action to ensure children and youth in foster care have access to an attorney – not a volunteer – to ensure their rights are fully heard. Research has shown that when children and youth have access to an attorney representing them, their outcomes improve in many ways, including an increased chance of a permanent placement. According to a study by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, access to a legal attorney improved foster children’s chances of reunifying with their families or going to an adoptive home within six months by 40 percent (Chapin Hall, 2016). Having an attorney also promotes an understanding by foster youth of their legal rights. Unfortunately, federal law does not currently require that all children have access to an attorney (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure youth in foster care do not suffer more abuse after being removed from their families and placed into care, Congress must:

- **Provide every child in foster care with access to legal representation by an attorney.** An attorney should be assigned to foster youth as soon as the child enters foster care, regardless of the age of the child.
- **Request a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report to learn more about abuse while in foster care.** There is too little data on the real incidence of foster youth maltreatment in foster care, and as a result, there has not been enough attention paid to this issue. Congress should request a GAO report on abuse that occurs while youth are in foster care placements. This would include a set of recommendations for Congress and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on how to reduce abuse and neglect that occurs within foster care.
- **Expand federal funding to establish Ombudsman's offices in every state to improve the safety of youth in foster care.** Although some states have already established Ombudsman's offices to receive and respond to complaints of abuse and neglect, the federal government should provide funding to incentivize more states to establish such offices outside of the child welfare agency. For states who currently have Ombudsman offices, federal funding should be allocated to strengthen existing operations to include a special focus on protecting children who are currently in foster care.

# HOME IS STABILITY: PROVIDING QUALITY HOUSING SUPPORTS FOR TRANSITION-AGED FOSTER YOUTH

*By Faith Sharp*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

In order to ensure housing stability for youth exiting care, Congress should 1) increase funding for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee), 2) amend Title IV-E to expand the Chafee program to include those who have achieved permanency but lack the resources to successfully attain independence, and 3) request the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) expand the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) eligibility to include those who have been in foster care and lack stability.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth with experience in the foster care system often experience housing instability. This leads to negative impacts on their outcomes and longer periods when they need support. An estimated 20 percent of young adults who are in foster care become homeless the day they age out. Nationwide, half of the homeless population spent time in foster care (AFCARS #22, 2015). Congress should ensure housing stability in order to create a stronger foundation for youth to matriculate into independence and put an end to the systematic slide into homelessness by amending the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for a Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) to ensure all youth aging out of foster care have clear access to resources that will allow them to obtain successful independence.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

During my six years in foster care, I moved over ten times. Each transition made it harder to move, added new trauma, and damaged many relationships beyond repair. Eventually, I moved out of an extended foster care kinship placement. From there, I went straight into a dorm at a college I chose based on the housing services that would be available to me rather than where I wanted to study. However, I was not mentally, emotionally, or financially prepared for college and was working three jobs trying to make ends meet. I inevitably dropped out and entered my first traditional foster home.



### PERSONAL REFLECTION (*CONTINUED*)

It took me a year at a local community college, two more traditional foster homes, and countless hours of therapy before I was ready to transition to a four-year university. But just a few months after moving into my dorm, the COVID-19 pandemic began, and I officially aged out of foster care. With the dorms closed, I began couch surfing and was constantly worried about how to keep a roof over my head. While I found myself with a robust support system, no matter how much someone believed in me, they couldn't provide me with the one thing I needed – a place to call my own. To this day, I still worry about housing instability and feel uncomfortable making choices that might threaten it. Once I have a lease on an apartment, I begin worrying about the next one and all that process entails. This past year was the first time in my adult life living in the same place for two consecutive years. I developed a bond with my neighbors, which made my place feel like home. With this support and stability, my grades, mental health, and overall comfort in life improved.

### THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Each year, more than 23,000 children age out of the U.S. foster care system, with approximately 20 percent of them becoming instantly homeless (Gaille, 2017). Within two years of leaving care, researchers estimate that over 40 percent of youth aging out experience housing instability (Schelbe, 2019). Despite the reality that many foster youth exit the system to homelessness, and that nationwide, 50 percent of the homeless population spent time in foster care, there are limited resources specifically designed to ensure all youth aging out of care have access to stable housing.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) via providing housing assistance to youth who have experience in the foster care system. However, these vouchers are in limited supply amid high demand. The FYI vouchers require that 1) youth who have left or will leave foster care be no more than 24 years of age and 2) be homeless or at-risk of being homeless (HUD, n.d.). HUD defines at-risk of being homeless as “having an income below 30 percent of the median family income for the area” (2018). These strict eligibility requirements reinforce that youth who have experienced foster care will most likely fall into a period of being unhoused.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Another program that is available to this population is the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for a Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee). The purpose of this funding is to help transition-aged foster youth, (i.e., 14-23 years old) successfully transition to adulthood. Each state has the flexibility to plan its programs within the guidelines of the Children's Bureau. However, the federal eligibility requirements limits the funding to those who are in care after the age of 14, in care or formerly in care for youth ages 18-21, and youth who left care after the age of 16 through adoption or guardianship. This leads to a barrier for those who do not meet or fall just outside of that criteria (John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, 2023).

In addition, Chafee provides states the option to provide Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) to students, but these vouchers often do not meet all of the financial needs for those pursuing higher education. Students receiving ETVs are required to choose between covering tuition, housing, books, food, and utilities. The maximum ETV an individual can receive each year is \$5,000 which is most times not sufficient to meet needs. This leads to many youth to overextend themselves with multiple jobs, dropping out, or forgoing higher education entirely (Tucker et al., 2023). Chafee and ETVs, coupled with the rental assistance programs available to the general population, can, under the best of circumstances, help meet the housing needs of youth aging out of care. Still, the reality is that the complex, patchwork nature and the difficulties of navigating the various systems means more often than not, they fall short (Fernandes-Alcantara et al., 2021).

Furthermore, not all former foster youth who experience homelessness are those who have aged out of the foster system. Many are youth who achieved permanency through adoption or reunification. However, when someone has achieved permanency through adoption or reunification, it does not mean there are still not lingering effects and trauma from their time in care (Chapin Hall, 2019). This population of former foster youth is often unable to participate in these housing programs because they are assumed to have the supports already in place to be successful. With over 20 percent of all former foster youth experiencing homelessness, this data proves it is a far more complex issue (AFCARS #22, 2015).

Data suggests that a major barrier to accessing housing supports for youth who have been in foster care is caused by a lack of knowledge by caseworkers about all the resources available. Recently, Florida signed a bill into law that would require caseworkers to educate their clients on the laws that would contribute to their success, including but not limited to housing (Parker, 2023). This legislation is a step towards helping youth be informed of their rights and adding a level of transparency to the complex web of services youth and case managers are attempting to navigate.

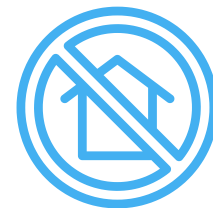
## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Supporting transition-age foster youth with critical supports, such as housing, has a strong return on investment. It increases their income and savings without contact with the criminal justice system by \$4.1 billion dollars (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019b). At Western Michigan University, they have a program called Seita Scholars that provides youth with mentorship, year-round housing, community with those who have similar life experiences, and supportive services needed to be successful in education (WMU, n.d). These kinds of programs showcase the importance of providing youth with all they need to feel secure as they transition to adulthood (Shroyer et. al, 2019). Investing in foster youth in early adulthood is an investment to get youth out of long-term entitlement programs and into the workforce on a path to success and stability.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Congress should ensure housing stability in order to create a stronger foundation for youth to matriculate into independence by:

- **Increasing funding for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood** (Chafee), to ensure all youth – both youth aging out of foster care and those who experienced failed adoption in adulthood – seeking education will have support with living expenses to help them achieve permanency post-system involvement.
- **Amending Title IV-E to expand the Chafee program** to include those who have achieved permanency but lack the resources to successfully attain independence.
- **Requesting U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) expand the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) eligibility** to include those who have been in foster care and lack stability, even if they were adopted or reunified, in order to prevent the foster care to homelessness pipeline and increase stability of those who have been involved in the foster care system.



# 20%

**BECOME INSTANTLY HOMELESS UPON AGING OUT OF CARE EACH YEAR ON AVERAGE**

(Gaille, 2017)



# 40%

**OF AGING OUT YOUTH ARE ESTIMATED BY RESEARCHERS TO EXPERIENCE HOUSING INSTABILITY WITHIN TWO YEARS OF LEAVING CARE**

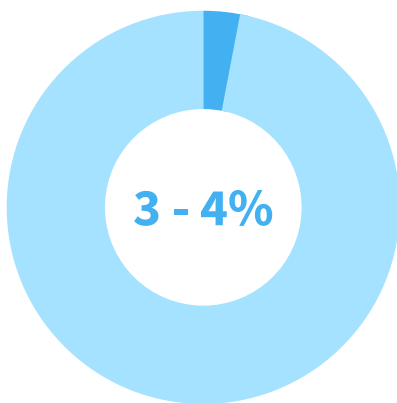
Schelbe, 2019)

# REFORMING CHAFEE TO BE MORE ENCOMPASSING, ACCESSIBLE, AND BENEFICIAL FOR FOSTER YOUTH

By Christian Sotomayor

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To ensure the John H. Chafee Foster Care for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) program is providing effective support to youth in their transition to adulthood, including pursuit of higher education, Congress should implement reforms such as 1) increasing funding for the Chafee program in accordance with the Biden Administration’s Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request of \$243 million per year, 2) expanding Chafee eligibility criteria to allow any youth who has spent more than one year in foster care and/or youth up to age 26 to benefit from the program, 3) allowing more flexibility in the Chafee program for foster youth to use financial assistance in ways that will meaningfully support their academic and personal success, and 4) incentivizing states through increased funding for Chafee to provide additional supports for youth in higher education settings, such as Berkeley Hope Scholars, and other programs specifically designed to support youth who have experienced foster care.



“Only three to four percent of youth who have experienced foster care obtain a four-year college degree.”

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Only three to four percent of youth who have experienced foster care obtain a four-year college degree, and only two to six percent receive a two-year degree (Okpych et al., 2021). These numbers reflect the significant challenges foster youth face as a result of limited resources. In choosing not to help foster youth address financial barriers they face, we as a nation are failing them and their ability to lead successful adult lives. To combat this issue, we must reform the John H. Chafee Foster Care for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) program to increase access to critical financial support for youth who have experienced foster care.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)**

As a youth impacted by the foster care system, my undergraduate experience has been considerably different from many of my peers. Where my peers have been able to obtain high grades, cultivate connections with professors, and enjoy their undergraduate years, I have struggled. This is not because I am less capable or driven, but because many of them have access to support and opportunities that I do not. Being a student at the University of California, Berkeley is a challenge full of rigor in itself. When combined with my identity as a foster youth, the financial burdens of tuition, food, and housing, I have experienced strain on my mental health which has made it challenging to succeed in the classroom. Where many students have been able to fully invest in their education by immersing themselves into their undergraduate experience, my mind and time has been preoccupied with how I would pay the expenses compounding on my desk.

Because of stringent eligibility requirements, I was devastated when I realized I could not access critical resources like the John H. Chafee Foster Care for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) – a program designed to help youth who have experienced foster care with their transition to adulthood. Early in my life, I spent time in foster care. Although I was eventually reunified with my family, I continue to encounter the lingering effects of my experience in foster care to this day. After vocalizing my concerns to friends, I was connected with Berkeley Hope Scholars, a local program created to provide assistance to any youth in need of support (Berkeley, 2023). The program provided me with the resources I needed to succeed academically and personally. This support from mentoring, books, food, housing, and financial assistance is helping me become a successful, stable adult.

I recognize I have been fortunate. However, I learned through many conversations with stakeholders that many foster youth experience significant challenges because they do not have the necessary support as they embark on their educational journey toward pursuing an adult life of stability, happiness, and success. Through vocalizing my lived experiences and utilizing my platform, I hope to emphasize the importance of resource accessibility. More foster youth can succeed if equipped with the proper resources and support. Only by increasing funding and broadening the eligibility criteria for existing programs like Chafee can we begin to address some of the systemic and financial barriers many foster youth face and, ultimately, ensure that they can fulfill their dreams of graduating from college.

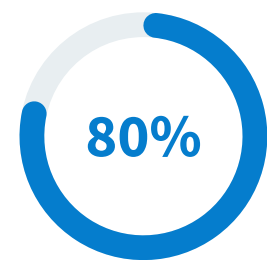
## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Alongside many of their non-foster peers, foster youth have a strong desire to earn a college degree. The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood (CaYOUTH) study by Chapin Hall, found that 80 percent of the foster youth surveyed indicated a desire to earn a college degree or higher (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). The daunting reality surrounding this dream is that only approximately three to five percent of youth who have experienced foster care will earn their bachelor's degree (Okpych et al., 2021). This is because the challenges these young people face throughout their lives do not end with a college acceptance. Many youth with lived experience in the child welfare system have an increased disposition to encounter educational setbacks resulting from poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, poor mental health, incarceration, and suicide (Cazares-Minero et al., 2022). Another study found that the “main barriers for higher-education access among foster youth were a lack of financial resources, the need to be in full-time employment, parenting responsibilities, and a lack of transportation” (Courtney et al., 2010). Higher education is critical to success in adulthood, but foster youth continue to be underrepresented in higher-level institutions because they are not equipped with the proper support, guidance, resources, or financial means to pursue and navigate higher education (Okpych et al., 2021).

Congress created the John H. Chafee Foster Care for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) program in 1999 to support individuals who have experienced foster care and transition to adulthood successfully. Chafee provides funding to states to connect youth in foster care to supportive services that help them build skills to succeed in school, work, and relationships, in addition to funding for daily needs such as housing and food. While the vision of Chafee is right, these services can only make a measurable difference in the lives of youth in foster care if youth are connected to them. Based on recent data released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, many older youth in foster care, or who have aged out of foster care, have never benefited from Chafee funding or services. As states reserve the right to allocate these funds, eligibility and participation greatly differ from state to state. Eligibility requirements for the program are narrow, and even for youth who are eligible, research suggests that less than half of those youth receive Chafee funded services (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). Surprisingly, some youth with experience in foster care have never even heard of Chafee.



### A SURVEY OF FOSTER YOUTH & HIGHER EDUCATION:



**INDICATED A DESIRE TO EARN A COLLEGE DEGREE OR HIGHER**



**WILL EARN THEIR BACHELOR'S DEGREE**

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Lawmakers have begun to take action to improve, expand flexibility and eligibility, and increase funding for Chafee. New funding and flexibilities for Chafee programs were passed as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020. More recently, the bipartisan Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act and the Biden Administration's Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request to Congress both proposed increased funding and flexibility for the program (HHS, 2023). In reimagining how Chafee operates, we can significantly increase the number of foster youth attending and graduating with college degrees – setting them up for more successful adulthoods. By increasing the federal budget for Chafee, we can incentivize states to create broader eligibility criteria and provide additional financial assistance to a greater number of youth. This change would elevate enrollment and graduation rates among foster youth by providing them with the financial stability to remain and thrive in higher educational institutions. It would ultimately serve to ensure that foster youth achieve successful and fulfilling lives.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that Congress reform the John H. Chafee Foster Care for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) program to ensure it is providing effective support to youth in their transition to adulthood, including pursuit of higher education, by:

- **Increasing funding for the Chafee program** in accordance with the Biden Administration's Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request of \$243 million per year;
- **Expanding Chafee eligibility criteria** to allow any youth who has spent more than one year in foster care and youth up to age 26 to benefit from the program;
- **Allowing more flexibility in the Chafee program** for foster youth to use financial assistance in ways that will meaningfully support their academic and personal success; and
- **Incentivizing states through increased funding for Chafee** to provide additional supports for youth in higher education settings, such as Berkeley Hope Scholars, and other programs specifically designed to support youth who have experienced foster care.

# SUPPORTED KINSHIP CARE DIVERSION: A KEY TOOL FOR KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER

*By Glenda Wright, JD*

## RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

**To support kinship caregivers and keep more children safely at home and out of foster care, Congress should 1) make all forms of kinship care the third required Title IV-E program and 2) require states to collect data on their kinship programs, specifically looking at the efficacy and benefits of voluntary supported diversion kinship care.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By establishing and funding a voluntary supported kinship care diversion model, we can support kinship families for better outcomes for kids, families, and the child welfare system.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I was two years old, my first experience with kinship care was when my siblings and I were placed in our maternal grandmother's care. Over the next 12 years, I would spend most of my adolescence raised by my grandmother. My grandmother loved me; this fact is indisputable. When I was with my grandmother, I knew what it meant to be loved. To the best of her ability, my grandmother always tried to provide my siblings and I with a safe, healthy, and loving home. My grandmother's efforts to meet all my needs never went unnoticed. However, neither did the fact that she struggled to meet her caregiving duties with access to limited resources.

That point was never more evident than when my grandmother sat us down to ask if we thought it would be best if she surrendered us to state care. Many people wonder why my grandmother would be willing to "give up" her caregiver role. The simple answer is this; she did not have the necessary support or services to meet the full range of our needs.

Neglect looks like abuse to the public without looking closely at causation. My grandmother did everything she could to wrap support around me so I was cared for. My grandmother worked multiple jobs to provide for us, even given her older age.



## PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

Additionally, my grandmother utilized state and local resources such as food stamps and non-profit services, including discounted or free clothing suppliers, school supply drives, and food centers. However, these minimal supports were unreliable and did not ultimately meet my grandmother's needs. Due to our chronic lack of resources, I recall times when I was hungry or the utilities were shut off.

My grandmother provided voluntary diversion kinship care to me for as long as she could. Her doing so saved my life, preserved my family connections, and delayed the abuse I would later experience while in foster care. However, stories like mine should not exist in the first place. While my grandmother unburdened the child welfare system when she agreed to care for four children, the system provided her with nothing in return. Instead, she was left alone with little to hang onto. If staying with my grandmother meant experiencing “neglect,” I would choose it time and time again over my experience in foster care. Youth should never have had to make that choice. My recommendations below outline policies that can better support voluntary diversion kinship families outside the child welfare system without having to enter into state custody.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

The data tells us that kids do best when they are kept in their families. A recent report by Chapin Hall states that, “for children in foster care, compared to placing them with strangers, kinship care has been shown to be safer, to be more likely to result in a permanent home for children, and to result in improved child well-being...[additionally] children in foster care with relatives are also more likely to maintain their cultural identities and stay connected to their siblings and communities” (Armendariz, 2023).

When it becomes unsafe for a child to remain in their family unit, they are taken into the state's custody or informally diverted through voluntary kinship care. Generally, voluntary diversion kinship care occurs when a child is living or is placed with a relative or other safe adult, such as a close family friend. Currently, more than 2.5 million children in the United States are under some form of kinship care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). The concept of kinship care may seem relatively straightforward when looking at the definition, but it is anything but that. Currently, there are three major “categories” regarding kinship care: formal, voluntary, and informal kinship care (Armendariz, 2023). This report focuses on voluntary diversion kinship families.

## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

While there is no uniform definition or practice for voluntary diversion kinship care, the general idea is that instead of the state taking formal custody, the child welfare agency works with the family to place the child with a kin caregiver to keep the child out of formal foster care. Unfortunately, there is minimal recent data on this population of youth and caregivers (Malm et al., 2019). However, a 2013 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which referenced 2003 data, stated that there were about 400,000 children “diverted from state custody to live with kin” throughout the nation (Foundation, 2013). Even though the data is lacking, we know that some form of kinship diversion practice is being implemented, but the extent and its effectiveness are unknown (Malm et al., 2019).

Kinship families are the invisible, unsupported backbone of the child welfare system. Parents across the country are making the difficult decision to ask individuals within their family unit if they care for their children to avoid contact with the foster care system. Like my grandmother, thousands of kin across the country are making the difficult decision to step up as caregivers, oftentimes at the risk of their own financial stability and well-being. Unlike foster parents, who receive notice before taking in a child, kin caregivers are usually asked to care for children without warning and planning. These kinship families and placements embody the definition of prevention. However, rather than support these families to prevent further system involvement and spur positive outcomes, the government provides kinship caregivers less than it provides strangers who care for children involved in traditional foster care.

With the right model, voluntary supported kinship care diversion can be the solution to reducing the number of children and families involved in the system and all the unintended consequences resulting from that experience. Elements of successful kinship diversion include an appropriate risk assessment to ensure the children’s safety, full disclosure of options for kin caregivers, appropriate needs assessment, and services to ensure all kin caregivers and birth families have the support they need to be successful (Foundation, 2013). This would not only improve outcomes for children and families, but it would also be significantly more cost-effective for our country.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To support kinship caregivers and keep more children safely at home and out of foster care, Congress should:

- **Make all forms of kinship care the third required Title IV-E program.**
  - Currently, there are only two required programs that state plans must include if they intend to draw down Title IV-E funding: (1) the intent to provide foster care and (2) adoption assistance. Given that we know kids do better in kinship care settings, it is time kinship care is the third required program to be included in state plans.
  - Use the Kinship Diversion Model (Foundation, 2013), as a foundation for guidance to the states on inclusion criteria for any voluntary supported kinship care diversion model. This guidance should be developed in partnership with young people, parents, and kinship caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system and informal kinship care diversion.
- **Require states to collect data on their kinship programs, specifically looking at the efficacy and benefits of voluntary supported diversion kinship care.**

## MEET THE AUTHORS



LinkedIn:



### ***Gianna Bottom (IL)***

Gianna Bottom (she/her/hers) is a rising senior at Illinois State University attending on a full-ride scholarship. She is triple majoring in criminal justice sciences, political science, and cybersecurity with an expected graduation date of fall 2023, while concurrently pursuing her master's of criminal justice sciences with an expected graduation date of spring 2024. Gianna's ambition in these fields are fueled by her experiences in the foster care system prior to being adopted at the age of eight. Gianna has held leadership roles, such as President of the Criminal Justice Association, which was awarded RSO of the Year at Illinois State University. She is also the recipient of the Criminal Justice Department L. Edward Wells Award, Ronald Reagan Leadership Award, and Hugh's O'Brian Youth Leadership Award. Gianna continues to grow her knowledge in advocacy and leadership by attending conferences, such as the Illinois Holocaust Museum and the Education Center's College Leadership Summit. Gianna aspires to work internationally in the areas of organized crime and human trafficking investigations, as well as policy after graduation.



LinkedIn:



### ***Nyomi Davis (CO)***

Nyomi Davis (she/her/hers) is a rising senior at the University of Denver (DU) in Colorado pursuing a bachelor's degree in socio-legal studies and public policy with a minor in business ethics and legal studies. Nyomi is attending DU on a full-ride scholarship from the Daniel's Fund and will graduate in June 2024. In fall 2024, she will attend law school with the long-term goal of advocating for youth. Nyomi volunteers with Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and is on the Colorado Office of Child Representatives Lived Experts Action Panel (LEAP) as a youth with experience in the foster system. With LEAP, Nyomi has helped train guardians ad litem (GALs) and participated in the process for passing legislation to move Colorado to youth-directed representation in dependency and neglect cases. She recently began working on the Colorado Child Abuse and Neglect Multidisciplinary and Cross-Jurisdictional Training Project. This project's goal is to improve the multi-disciplinary and cross-jurisdictional connections in Colorado's foster system through a variety of training products. In Denver, Nyomi works two jobs, is a full-time student, and is the president of her university's mock trial program.

## Meet the Authors Continued



LinkedIn:



### **Jessica Herrera (CA)**

Jessica Herrera (she/her/hers) is a recent graduate of the University of California Los Angeles. Jessica graduated with a bachelor's degree in history and double minors in Latin American and education studies. Her studies in education have driven her interest in learning more about the role of law in students' rights. The lack of conversations about foster youth's right to education have led Jessica to develop her research as an Undergraduate Research Fellow. Recently, she completed her research study titled, "Invisible Population: The Role of Community Cultural Wealth in Foster Youth Population at UCLA Through BGS." Jessica discusses the importance of support programs on college campuses geared towards foster youth and the community they create. She plans on pursuing a law degree to use her expertise through academic and lived experiences to advocate for foster youth's right to an education.



LinkedIn:



### **Jamarri Maurice Kane-White (DC/MD)**

Jamarri Maurice Kane-White (he/him/his) is a senior at Howard University pursuing a degree in computer science. Jamarri had been in the child welfare system for 10 years and began advocacy work during his freshman year of college. Since then, he has had the opportunity to work with Think of Us, FosterClub, National Center For Children and Families (NCCF), and now CCAI. Jamarri is the recipient of the Right Direction Award by AG Karl Racine, as well as the FosterClub's Outstanding Young Leader recognition award. With his computer science degree, Jamarri hopes to utilize his skills in technology in order to make resources more attainable for foster youth through the use of mobile applications and digital designs.



LinkedIn:



### **Eunice Mejiadeu (DC/MD/VA)**

Eunice Mejiadeu (she/her/hers) is a rising junior at Howard University pursuing a bachelor's degree in criminology and Afro-American history. With a passion for advocacy, she is a member of the Pete Greene Program at Howard University where she tutors incarcerated youth in Northeast D.C. She serves as an Advocates For Youth, Engaging Communities Around HIV/AIDS. Her work includes advocating for non-anti-discrimination legislation for people living with HIV/AIDS and a comprehensive sex-ed curriculum. She was privileged to speak at Johns Hopkins University and serve on various panels, such as the CDC World AIDS Day event, Trevor Project HIV/AIDS initiative, and Congresswoman Barbara Lee's National Youth HIV/AIDS Awareness Day roundtable. Eunice was born in Cameroon, Africa, a large epicenter for HIV/AIDS, before immigrating to the United States at the age of five. Her background and experience in the foster care system have led her to study the pipeline between children in care and sex trafficking with a focus on the U.S. and East-Asian countries. She is examining the over-representation of black and brown youth, specifically black women, in the foster care system who are at high rates of being trafficked and exposed to HIV/AIDS. Eunice hopes to one day pursue a career as an advocate.

## Meet the Authors Continued



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### **Aoguzi Muhammet McDonald (MA)**

Aoguzi M. McDonald (he/him/his) is a recent graduate of Georgetown University's Edmund. A. Walsh School of Foreign Service with a major in international politics (foreign policy concentration) and a minor in Japanese. Born in Japan to Uyghur parents, Aoguzi immigrated to the United States when he was 10 years old. Aoguzi developed a passion for politics growing up as the child of an Uyghur activist, as well as having attended human rights rallies from a young age. He has placed that passion into practice by completing several prior internships within both Congress and the private sector. Aoguzi also enjoys his time serving on the youth advisory board of the Rise Above Foundation in Massachusetts where he contributes ideas towards different ways of helping former and current foster youth who are just becoming adults. Outside of work, Aoguzi enjoys sports, video games, and cooking.



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### **Idelia Robinson-Confer (PA)**

Idelia Robinson-Confer (she/her/hers) is a dedicated advocate, speaker, and student. Idelia received her B.S. in psychology and is pursuing a MPA degree focusing on policy research and analysis at the University of Pittsburgh. Idelia's lived experience and advocacy involvement led her to choose this course of study. She is an executive member of the Western Pennsylvania Youth Action Board, a Youth Policy Consultant for the American Youth Policy Forum, and a RESULTS fellow. Idelia was previously an Opportunity Youth Congressional Fellow and a U.S Housing and Urban Development Region 3 Technical Assistance Training Consultant. Idelia leads with her own lived experience to empower and expand opportunities for youth. She advocates for enhancing resources and services aimed at children and youth, including areas, such as education, employment, mental health services, and the establishment of permanent connections. Idelia believes in centering the voices of young people and acknowledging that they are the experts in solutions and decisions that shape their lives.



LinkedIn:



### **Isabel N. Rodriguez (MI)**

Isabel N. Rodriguez (she/her/hers) is a recent graduate with high honors from The University of Michigan - Ann Arbor. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in sociology: law, justice, and social change and a minor in intergroup relations. Isabel used her time at the top ranked public research institution in the United States to conduct research exploring the impacts that lived experience in the foster care system has on the educational experiences at prestigious universities. Isabel's research was nominated for several academic writing awards and university recognition. Since 2018, Isabel has been advocating for foster youth beginning with her role as president of Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative - Youth Board.

## Meet the Authors Continued

### **Isabel N. Rodriguez cont.**

She furthered her advocacy by serving as a board member on the Michigan State Youth Advisory Board and working with organizations, such as FosterClub, National Foster Youth Institute, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Opportunities Initiative, and Casey Family Programs. Isabel's professional and academic achievements have been recognized by the Outstanding Young Leaders Award, the MLK Spirit Award, and the Eita Krom Prize. Isabel has found her passion and purpose in using her voice, skills, awareness, and access to advocate for transformation of the child welfare system. Isabel is currently an MPA candidate at Western Michigan University where she hopes to continue her studies in order to pursue a career in policy or government.



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### **Kayleen Shapiro (IL)**

Kayleen Shapiro (she/her/hers) is a recent Illinois State University graduate with a major in criminal justice and legal studies and a minor in psychology. In college, she was a member of the Chi Omega sorority, the Criminal Justice Association, Pre-Law Club, Mock Trial, Honors College, and took an alternative spring break trip to teach in St. Lucia. Kayleen is interested in learning more about policies related to child abuse and neglect within the foster care system. In 2018, she worked on the JB Pritzker political campaign where she was able to learn about the policies related to this issue. While Kayleen is currently undecided about what she wishes to pursue in the future, she hopes to either attend Harvard Law School and become a criminal prosecutor or earn her Ph.D. in psychology and become a forensic psychiatrist in a correctional facility.



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### **Faith Sharp (MO)**

Faith Sharp (she/her/hers) is a rising senior at Missouri State University pursuing a bachelor's degree in sociology with minors in nonprofit leadership and political science and certificate in advocacy writing. Throughout her studies, Faith has participated in various leadership and advocacy experiences, such as the FosterClub's AllStar internship, National Foster Youth Institute's Congressional Shadow Day, as well as being the fundraising chair for her university's Model United Nations Club. She has had the joy of working on the Youth Housing Demonstration Program with the Community Partnership of Southeast Missouri and serving as a program coordinator for One Simple Wish. Her primary interest is in creating policies that help transitional-aged foster youth receive individualized support on their journey to success and ensuring that youth in rural districts have equal access to programs designed for them. She aspires to continue working with those who are capable and passionate about creating lasting change in all systems and ensuring that lived experiences are at the forefront of these conversations.

## Meet the Authors Continued



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### **Christian Sotomayor (CA)**

Christian Sotomayor (he/him/his) is a fourth-year student at the University of California, Berkeley. He is double majoring in political science and legal studies and minoring in public policy. In the past, Christian has worked closely with local non-profit and student-led organizations on policy issues important to him. He is very passionate about policy issues pertaining to racial justice, immigration, education, healthcare, over-policing, and criminal justice reform. His devotion and dedication to these issues have allowed him to earn countless awards, scholarships, and recognition. Christian currently works as a legal assistant at a litigation firm based in Orange County, California. In the future, he would love to attend law school to obtain his Juris Doctorate. Christian enjoys going on long hikes, reading, working out, trying new foods, and photography in his free time.



LinkedIn:



### **Glenda Wright (KY)**

Glenda Wright (she/her/hers) recently graduated from the Salmon P. Chase College of Law, where she received her Juris Doctorate in May 2022. Glenda has also earned her Bachelor of Science in business with a minor in legal studies from Murray State University. While attending law school, Glenda participated in several extracurricular activities, including serving as senior editor of the Northern Kentucky Law Review and being president of the Phi Alpha Delta: Hoffman Chapter. In August 2020, Glenda and her business partner, Tyler Hunter, launched Wright & Hunter Consulting, a firm focused on working with and strengthening all partners in the child welfare continuum. Glenda's passion for child welfare reform comes from her experiences living in the Kentucky foster care system. That passion has led to numerous policy and legislative changes, including two critical pieces of legislation that helped change the way foster care works for youth in Kentucky. For the past 10 years, Glenda has dedicated herself to improving the child welfare system so that other youth and families like hers don't have to experience what she and so many others do.



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