

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Nationally, approximately 25,000 youth age out of our foster care system every year. Roughly, 800 of these youth are from New Jersey, and at any given time in New Jersey, there are approximately 3000 youth, ages 15-21, involved with the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). These youth, like most youth, have a difficult time transitioning into adulthood. However, unlike most youth, foster youth lack the traditional and vital supports that most young adults have and require. As a result, they have a much more difficult time completing high school, going to college, obtaining jobs, and even meeting their most basic needs. The foster care system is supposed to be their safety net, providing much needed services and resources.

Yet, anyone involved in the child welfare system knows that youth who are still in foster care on their eighteenth birthday are not well-positioned to succeed, and unfortunately, are at great risk of homelessness, pregnancy, and involvement in our criminal justice system. National studies confirm this anecdotal information. The Chapin Hall Center for Children and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have devoted significant resources to studying and tracking the lives of youth who age out of our foster care systems. These studies, conducted before the downturn in the economy, reveal that youth transitioning out of the system are struggling due to a lack of education, employment and housing. Desperate, they are turning in large numbers to government-sponsored financial assistance programs.

Beginning in 2006, New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF) began to recognize the needs of this population of youth. Policies began to change and the necessary services and resources increased. Yet, change has been slow, and much work remains. For example, while DYFS policy has changed to allow a youth's DYFS case to remain open until the youth turns twenty-one, current data from DCF illustrates that the majority of DYFS cases are

still being closed at the age of eighteen, even for children with serious mental illnesses who are exiting from residential treatment centers. The most recent Federal Court Monitoring Report, dated January 7, 2010, also finds the situation still lacking for transitioning youth.

[W]ork still remains to be done to ensure that older youth, particularly 18-21 year olds are adequately provided for when they transition from DYFS custody without having achieved permanency. Despite notable accomplishments in this area, including adding 240 transitional living beds for youth transitioning out of the foster care system, interviews with community stakeholders continually indentify that the need for more such housing options and other supports far outstrip current resources and that any youth wait long periods of time for aftercare services upon leaving DYFS custody.

The New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel (hereinafter “CWCRP” or “the Panel”) recently engaged in a comprehensive survey of youth transitioning out of New Jersey’s foster care system, as well as the advocates, volunteers, and some of the professionals who work directly with the youth. This is the first such survey to be conducted in the State of New Jersey. The results provide extensive data about how the youth perceive their experiences in foster care, as well as what the youth, and those who work with the youth, feel the youth need to assist them in transitioning into adulthood. It is the Panel’s hope that the voices of the youth will be heard, that we all learn from these reports, and that the proposed recommendations will be followed.

#### WHO RESPONDED

175 youth, ages 15 to 21, from sixteen different counties, participated in the survey. 241 professionals took the survey. They included court volunteers such as Child Placement Review Board (CPRB) members and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA); Law Guardians, who represent the youth in court; and case managers, supervisors, and executive management from Care Management, Youth Case Management, and Family Support organizations.

## POSITIVE FINDINGS

One significant and very positive finding of this survey was that almost all of the youth who responded (92.6%) indicated that there are adults in their lives who care about them. These adults provide an important support system for youth transitioning out of care. Moreover, although 91% of the youth reported not living with their family, over two-thirds reported maintaining regular contact with their birth or adoptive parents and their siblings.

There also were some positive findings in the area of health care. A majority of the youth surveyed (85.7%) reported that they had health insurance and 80.9% also knew they were eligible for Medicaid. Similarly, 61.4% of the professionals indicated that 75% or more of the youth they served had Medicaid or some other form of health insurance.

## CONCERNS

The biggest areas of concern centered on the need for additional and improved supportive services for the youth to help them make the difficult transition into adulthood.<sup>1</sup> The youth were asked to prioritize what issues they thought were most important to them. The top three answers were housing, education, and health care, with finances and employment being mentioned quite frequently as well. The professionals echoed this extreme need for increased and improved housing options, as well as the need for additional assistance to support the youth in the educational arena.

Too many youth reported having their DYFS cases closed against their wishes. An open DYFS case permits youth to access housing options and other services, not otherwise available to them. Many of the youth with closed cases (72.4%) recognized that their case was being closed; however, only 43.1% said they signed an agreement that the case would be closed, as

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<sup>1</sup> Consistent with these results, the most recent Child and Family Services Review, conducted in the Spring of 2009, noted that stakeholders reported that while the State is providing increased services, there continued to be insufficient resources and services for transitioning youth.

mandated by DYFS policy for those youth over the age of 18. Most disturbing is that of the 43.1% who signed a case closing agreement, only 55% of them reported understanding what they were signing.

In the area of education, the majority of professionals indicated that 75% or more of youth, ages 15-18, are in some type of educational/vocational program. However, when discussing youth ages 18-21, the numbers decreased significantly. Only 8.5% stated that 75% or more of the youth they worked with were in an educational or vocational program. Moreover, 73.7% of the youth indicated that they knew of the NJ Foster Care Scholars program, yet only 43.1% of the youth who indicated that they had knowledge of the state scholarship program, had their current education paid by the NJ Foster Care Scholars Program. The survey results could not determine if the youth responding were eligible to receive services and were denied or if they were ineligible and were denied indicating the need for further exploration.

Services for transitioning youth also include life skills, after care services, and financial assistance. The findings in these areas are extremely concerning. Although the majority of the youth know about the availability of this assistance, the youth state that they are either unaware what is available to them, and/or are not being referred. Additionally, over two-thirds of the youth, who are over the age of 18, reported that they are not involved in an aftercare agency, and of those involved with an after care agency, less than a quarter reported receiving Chaffee wrap around funds through the aftercare agency.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- An outside entity, which includes youth, should be created to monitor DYFS case closure policy and practice for aging out youth. Such an entity would be charged with determining if there is a discrepancy between policy and practice. Moreover, until it can be verified that the case closure policy is being followed, there should be a moratorium on case closures for youth 18 and older.

- DYFS should re-visit their policy to ensure that it is clear that all youth who choose to end their relationship with DYFS, and then find themselves in need of assistance, can reopen their cases and receive the necessary support.
- DCF should evaluate its current housing contracts to ensure that current expenditures are being used most effectively for transitioning youth.
- An increased array and continuum of housing options should be developed for transitioning youth from least to most restrictive, considering the special needs of many of the youth. It is imperative that DCF increase the availability of each type of housing option (i.e., transitional living programs, group homes, longer term subsidized housing).
- DCF should increase the amount awarded for those youth who find their own housing and seek the Independent Living stipend.
- Additional life skills classes and after care programming needs to be developed.
- DCF should explore whether the administration of the Chafee Wrap Around funds is best managed by the after care programs or whether DCF should take over this responsibility. In addition, DCF should assess whether there is a duplication of case management services when there is a DYFS case open and the youth also receives case management from an after care program.
- DYFS, DCBHS, and the JJC need to work more collaboratively with one another to meet the needs of the youth.
- The courts need to be more vigilant in its oversight of this vulnerable population by holding DYFS accountable for complying with its own policies.
- All of the professionals who work with the youth need to be fully informed of the educational opportunities available to aging out youth and the rights and entitlements of youth who are classified.

## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

The New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel (hereinafter “CWCRP” or “the Panel”) is charged with reviewing the policies, practices, and procedures of New Jersey’s child protection system, and making recommendations for improvement. The mission of the CRP is to improve the safety, well being and permanency of NJ children by examining the practices, policies and procedures of State and local agencies; and to evaluate the extent to which they are effectively meeting their child protection responsibilities. Approximately two years ago, the CRP decided to focus on the needs of youth transitioning out of New Jersey’s foster care system. For years, various CRP members had been hearing and observing concerns about these youth as they transition to adulthood, the need for additional services for transitioning youth, and a lack of awareness about available services.

To gain a better understanding of the experiences of the youth, the Panel elected to conduct a comprehensive survey of the youth, as well as the advocates, volunteers, and some of the professionals who work directly with the youth. CRP members created the survey and Professor Robert Reid of Montclair State University reviewed and edited both survey instruments prior to distribution.

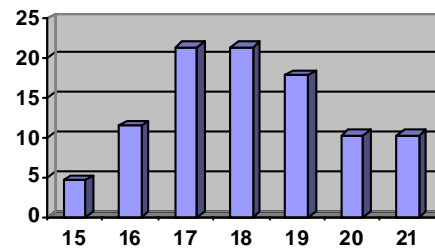
Surveys were administered statewide over a seven month period (November 2008 through June 2009) to both the youth and the stakeholders. Using an online survey tool, “Survey Monkey,” the stakeholders completed the survey. Youth were given the option of taking the survey on line or completing a paper version, which was then inputted onto the Survey Monkey data base by law students from the Rutgers University School of Law–Newark. The results provide extensive empirical, qualitative and quantitative data about the perceptions and experiences of the youth and those working with the youth. Additionally, the results provide

insight into what the youth, and those working with the youth, feel they need. This is the first such survey to be conducted in the State of New Jersey. Accordingly, this is the first opportunity for the child welfare community, legislators, and policymakers, as well as the State as a whole, to hear from foster youth, and those working with them, about what the youth feel they need to support them in transitioning into adulthood. It is the Panel’s hope that their voices will be heard, and that the recommendations, which are generated in response to these powerful messages, will be followed.

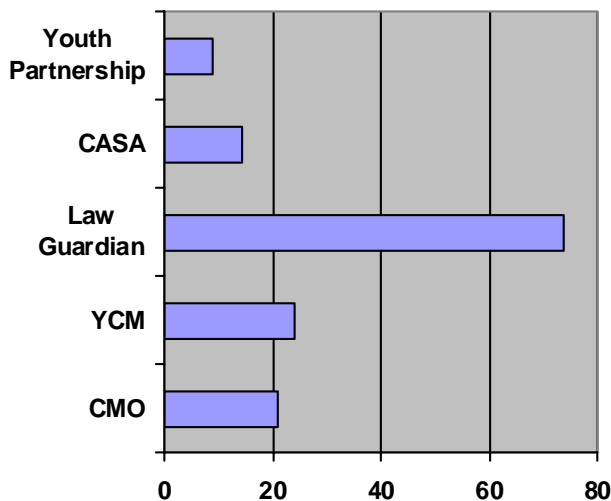
**WHO RESPONDED**

175 youth responded to the survey. Their ages ranged between 15 and 21, and they were from sixteen counties. Of the youth who responded, 42.6% were 17 or 18-years-old, over half (61.7%) were African American, and almost two-thirds (60.8%) were female. A few youth had children of their own (13.5%).

**Age of Youth**



**System Involvement**



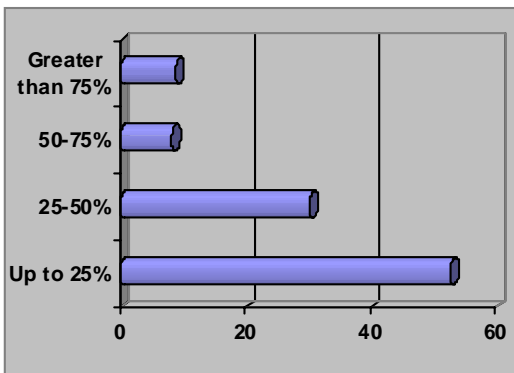
The youth indicated that they were involved with one or more of the following systems: Care Management Organizations (20.9%), Youth Case Management (24.7%), Law Guardian Program (73.6%), Court Appointed Special Advocate (14.3%) and Youth Partnership (8.8%). Of those who responded they had family court cases due to DYFS involvement, 69.6% of the youth

found their law guardian helpful. Other persons that the youth described as helpful were the judge (42.6%), Child Placement Review Board volunteers (12.2%), and their Court Appointed Special Advocate (9.6%).<sup>2</sup>

Responses were recorded from 241 professionals, some identifying with more than one category. Most of these were volunteers affiliated with the courts: CASA (31.4%) and Child Placement Review Board volunteers (30.9%). Of the other professionals responding, 16.9% worked with Care Management Organizations (CMOs) and 8.9% with Family Support Organizations (FSOs). Another 8.5% were Law Guardians. The remainder (6.3%) came from Youth Case Management (YCM) or Unified Case Management (UCM), youth partnerships, and Legal Services of New Jersey. Among the professionals, the majority were volunteers (52.1%). The survey had been forwarded to the Division of Child Behavioral Health Services for distribution as well as to several Transitional Living Programs.

A majority of the professionals (85%) stated that they or their agency regularly worked with DYFS-involved youth between the ages of 15 and 21 years-old. In fact, 53% of the

**Percentage of Caseload Representing DYFS Involved Transitioning Youth**



professionals stated that “transitioning” youth comprised up to 25% of their caseloads, and 30% reported that these youth represented 25-50 % of their caseload. Significantly, almost half of the professionals (47.5%) indicated that the youth, ages 15 to 21, served by their agency also were involved with DCBHS and these youth represented up to

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that several of the questions, like this one, gave opportunities for multiple answers to be marked. Therefore, several of the percent totals will add up to over 100%.

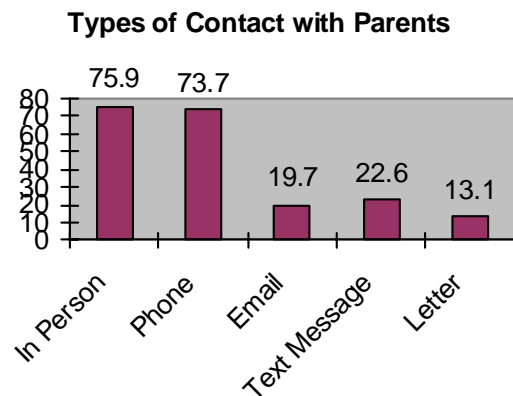
25% of the caseload. Many professionals (66%) also responded that up to 25% of their youth are currently involved in the juvenile and/or criminal justice system.

## CONNECTION WITH FAMILY

### Parents

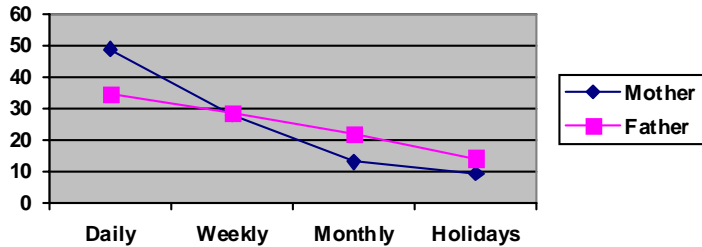
The vast majority of the youth (91%) reported that they do not live with a parent, yet over two-thirds have contact with their birth or adoptive parents, either in-person (75.9%) and/or by telephone (73.7%). Likewise, the professionals noted that youth had contact with a parent in over 75% of their cases. Over one quarter of the professionals (28%) indicated that 50-75% of the youth they serve have family contact. Only 3.8% of professionals indicated the youth they work with have no contact with their biological parents.

The youth responses indicated that youth have more contact with their mothers than fathers. Almost half of the youth (49.1%) reported having daily contact with their mothers, while only 34.9% of the youth reported having daily contact with their fathers. As for youth raised by someone other than a parent, over 60% of the youth reported that they have regular contact with that individual either in person or by telephone.



The youth's reporting on contact with their parents is consistent with what the professionals reported. Over one-third of professionals (35%) stated that greater than 75% of their youth had contact with their mothers; whereas only 9.7% indicated that more than 75% of the youth had contact with their fathers. In fact, 39.4% of the professionals reported that less

**Parental Contact**



than 25% of the youth they work with have contact with their fathers. More importantly, 39.4% of the professionals stated that up to 25% of the contact between the youth and the parent was initiated by the youth.

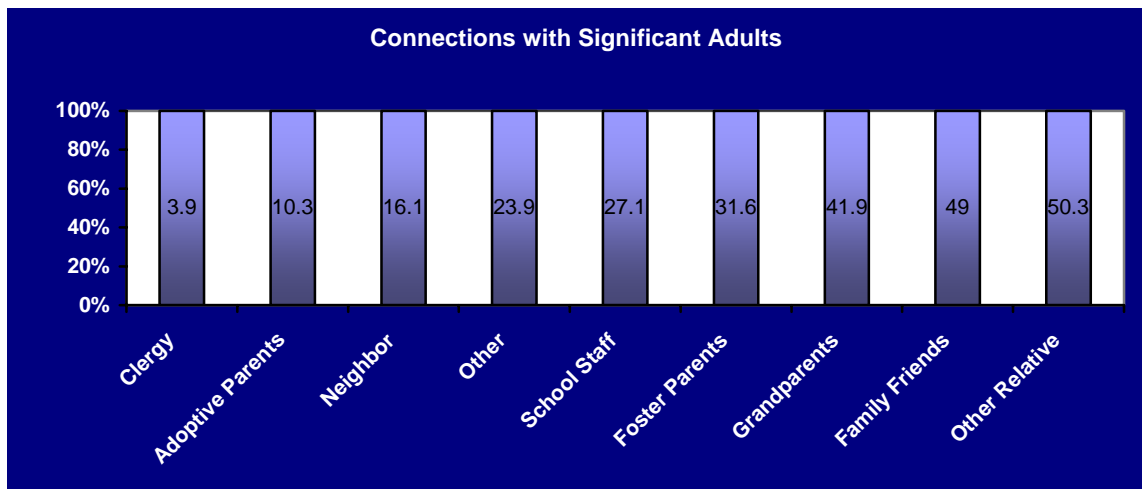
### **Siblings**

Over 95% of the youth reported having siblings and 72.7% of those youth reported having regular contact with them in person (78.2%) and/or by telephone (74.2%). The professionals reported a lower percentage of contact between youth and their siblings than the youth reported. When asked “How many of the youth with whom you work have contact with any of their siblings?” only 29.7% answered “greater than 75%.”

A majority of the youth (55.6%) felt that DYFS did not help them initiate contact between the youth and their siblings. However, almost half of the youth (44.4%) reported they receive assistance from DYFS in maintaining contact with their families. Comparatively, the vast majority of professionals (79.5%) believed that an agency or person made sure contact between the youth and their siblings occurred. The perception on the part of professionals that sibling contact is being facilitated by someone other than the youth is much larger than what the youth are reporting in this survey. A majority of the youth (64.4%) reported that no one else assisted them with maintaining contact with their siblings.

## OTHER CARING ADULTS/CONNECTIONS

Studies have shown that when youth have a “caring adult” in their lives, they fair better in the transitioning process than those without one in their lives.<sup>3</sup> One significant and very positive finding of this survey was that almost all of the youth who responded (92.6%) indicated that there are adults in their lives who care about them. Other Relatives (50.3%), family friends (49%), and Grandparents (41.9%), were the leading categories. Also included were foster parents (31.6%), school staff (27.1%), birth parents (25.8), and clergy (3.9%). Most youth (85%) go to this person for assistance.



While professionals did not observe the presence of this “caring adult” quite as frequently as was reported by the youth, many did note the involvement of such an adult in the lives of the youth. 31.4% of the professionals indicated that this was true in 25-50% of their caseload; 25% felt this was true in more than 75% of their caseload; 24.5% felt this was true in 50-75% of their caseload; and 18% felt this was true in up to 25% of their caseload. An overwhelming

<sup>3</sup> Kym R. Ahrens, MD, MPH, David Lane DuBois, PhD, Laura P. Richardson, MD, MPH, Ming-Yu Fan, PhD, and Paula Lozano, MD, MPH, *Youth in Foster Care With Adult Mentors During Adolescence Have Improved Adult Outcomes*, PEDIATRICS, Vol. 121, No. 2 (February 2008).

percentage of professional responders (95.1%) noted the importance of and need for supportive adults to become involved in mentoring aging out youth.

## **DYFS INVOLVEMENT**

The majority of the youth (74%) stated that DYFS was still a part of their life and 68.2 % of them reported still having an open DYFS case. Of the 27.4% youth with closed cases, 55.6% stated that they wanted their case closed; while 44.4% indicated they did not want their case closed. When asked “How old were you when your DYFS case was closed?” 32.7% of the youth indicated that their case was closed when they were 18 years old. Other youth (21.2%) reported their case was closed while they were between the ages of 15-17 and 15.38% said their case was closed when they were between the ages of 19-21. Several of the youth (30.8%) indicated their case was closed when they were 14 years of age or younger. Many of the youth with closed cases (72.4%) recognized that their case was being closed; however, only 43.1% said they signed an agreement that the case would be closed, as is required by DYFS policy for youth over the age of 18. Most disturbing is that of the 43.1% who signed a case closing agreement, only 55% of them indicated they understood what they were signing.

## **SERVICES AND ASSISTANCE**

Only 14.7% of the professionals responding felt that 75% or more of the youth receive the support and services they need. A large number of youth (77%) were aware that services were available for young people over the age of 18, however, over half (51.7%) did not feel they needed additional services. Those youth who felt they needed additional services (48.3%) stated they needed assistance with furthering their education, obtaining housing and other financial assistance. The youth were asked to prioritize what issues they thought were most important to them. The top three answers were education (86%), housing (77.7%), and health care (69.6%).

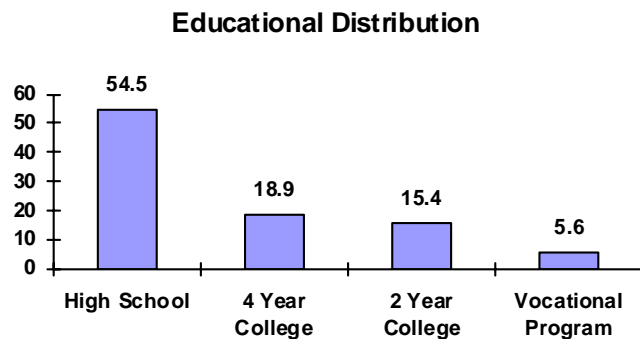
## Education

In the area of education, 47.8% of the youth reported that they had their high school diploma or GED and 89.2% of the rest reported they were still in school. Of the total number of youth who report they are still in school, 54.5% state they are currently enrolled in high school. Other youth reported that they attend a higher education program on a full-time basis. (18.9% were enrolled in a 4 year college, 15.4% enrolled in a 2 year college, and 5.6% enrolled in vocational program). There were 5.6% of the youth who reported that they attended some form of higher education program part-time.

When the professionals were asked “What percentage of youth, 15-18, are in some type of educational/vocational program?” many of professionals (37.3%) indicated that 75% or more of youth, are in some type

of educational/vocational program. Another 21.6% indicated that up to 25% are in a program, 19.4% indicated that the youth were in a program, 15.7% indicated that 50-75% were in a program, and 6% of professionals indicated that none were in a vocational/educational program.

However, when the professionals were asked if youth, ages 18-21, were in some type of educational/vocational programming, the numbers decreased significantly. Only 8.5% stated that 75% or more of the youth they worked with were in an educational or vocational program. The majority of the professionals (42.3%) reported that only up to 25% are in some educational/vocational program. The perceived drop in educational and vocational training after



the age of 18 is concerning. A recent study of former foster youth in other states found that enrollment in a 4 year college peaks at age 19.<sup>4</sup>

### **Education: Financial Assistance**

The New Jersey Foster Care Scholars Program (“NJ Foster Scholars Program”) is a DCF supported program designed for youth who are or were in the foster care system to financially assist the youth with post-secondary education. The NJ Foster Care Scholars Program was known to 73.7% of the youth, yet only 43.1% of the youth who indicated that they had knowledge of the state scholarship program, had their current education paid by the NJ Scholars Program. The majority of the youth who were in higher education programs (56.9%) reported that they received no assistance from the NJ Foster Care Scholars program but there is no way to glean from the survey whether the youth were eligible to receive the funds but did not know of the service and how many of the total did not receive the funds because they were not eligible. Additionally, 59.4% of the youth indicated that they were not receiving financial assistance for their education outside of the NJ Foster Care Scholars Program and government aid opportunities.

The responses from the professionals were consistent with the youth. 54% of the professionals responded that none of the youth were supported by the NJ Foster Care Scholars program, 38.1% indicated that up to 25% were supported, 5.3% responded that 25-50% were supported, 1.8% responded that 50-75% were supported, and only one person indicated that greater than 75% of the youth were supported by the Scholars Program. The responses do not speak to the status of eligibility but to knowledge of the supporting source.

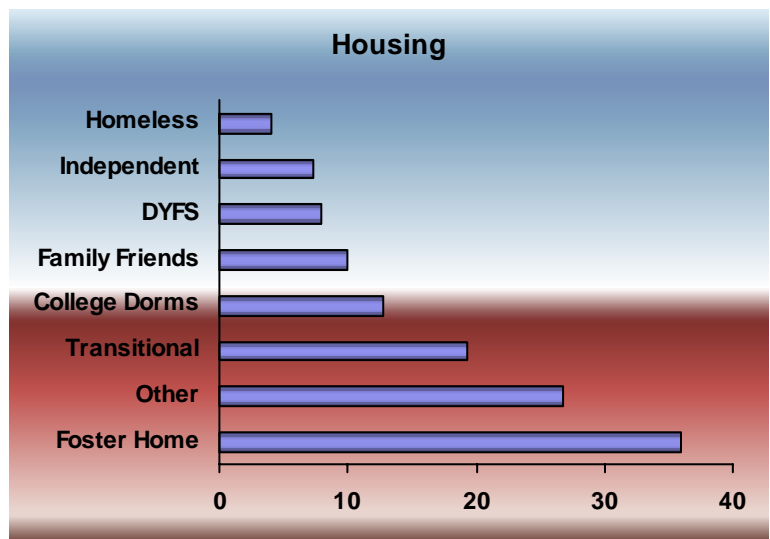
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<sup>4</sup> Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Thomas Keller, Judy Havlicek, Alfred Perez, Sherri Terao, Noel Bost, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster: Youth Outcomes at Age 21*, Chapin Hall Center for Children, pp. 77-78 (December 2007).

## Housing

Many of the youth (36%) reported that their current living situation is in a resource or foster home. Other youth reported living in transitional living programs (19.3%), college dorms (12.7%), with family friends (10%), in apartments supported by DYFS Independent Living funds (8%), on their own (7.3%), or that they were homeless (4%). Additionally, 26.7% of the youth identified with the “Other” category. Of those youth who indicated “Other,” 6.6% were living with their birth/adoptive parents and 4.6% were living with family friends. Several of the youth (31.4%) were living in foster care on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Even though most of the youth had a place to live currently, their answers and remarks reflect their concern for their housing situation in the near future. This was a concern of the professionals as well. When asked about additional resources



needed with regard to housing support, most (69.4%) professionals stressed the need for adequate and affordable housing. Moreover, when given the opportunity to expound on housing issues, professionals mentioned that there is a severe lack of transitional housing, permanent housing, or housing that could provide adequate supervision for transitioning youth. The responses for both the youth and the professionals indicate that housing is a major concern and that there are not enough appropriate and affordable housing options for the youth.

## **Finances/Employment**

According to the youth themselves, 40% work, and of those working, 84.7% work part-time. Many professionals (44.2%) stated that up to 25% of the youth were employed, 15.5% indicated that 25-50% were employed, 13.2% responded that 50-75% of the youth were employed. Notably, only 1.6% responded that over 75% of their youth were employed. Additionally, 25.6% of the professionals responded that none of the youth they work with were employed.

Although a number of youth and professionals stated that the youth had not received any assistance in obtaining employment, the youth's answers were significantly different than those reported by the professionals. The vast majority of the youth (77.7%) reported that no one assisted them in obtaining employment. Comparatively, when the professionals were asked about the percentage of youth, age 18-21, who received assistance from a state agency or community group in obtaining employment, 47.3% of the professionals responded that none received assistance. This 30.4% difference could be attributed to perception as to what is defined as employment assistance. The finding highlights the need to further explore the availability of employment assistance and the designated bodies to provide it.

## **Health Care**

A youth in the system is eligible for Medicaid up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday so long as their DYFS case remains open. However, if they close their case after the age of 18, they still have a Medicaid option available to them. The Medicaid Extension for Young Adults (MEYA) program extends Medicaid to youth between the ages of 18-21, whose DYFS case closed after they turned 18, prior to the age 21, presuming the youth meet certain other eligibility requirements. On a positive note, a majority of the youth surveyed (85.7%) reported that they had health insurance, and 80.9% also knew they were eligible for Medicaid. Similarly, 61.4% of the professionals

indicated that 75% or more of the youth had Medicaid or some other form of health insurance. Although they were aware that their youth had health insurance, the majority of the professionals (54.2%) were unaware of the MEYA program.

### **Life Skills**

According to DYFS policy, adolescents who are at least 14 years old and older and in a DYFS paid-placement, should be referred for Life Skills training.<sup>5</sup> Life Skills programs offer instruction in financial management, cooking, housekeeping, self-care, and other daily living skills. However, the survey results show that policy and practice are not the same. When the youth were directly asked “Do you know about life skills classes?” the majority of the youth (67.3%) answered yes. However, an astounding 67.9% of the youth indicated they never completed a life skills program. A majority of youth (59.3%) indicated that they were never referred, and, of these youth, 56.8% were unaware that life skills classes were even available to them. Another 15.7% stated they had no transportation to get there. Only 40.7% reported being referred to a program by their DYFS worker, and of those youth referred, only 27% reported completing their life skills instruction.

Of the professionals responding to this set of questions, 32.3% revealed that they believe that less than 25% of the youth are being referred to life skills classes by DYFS, and 33.1% indicated that none of the youth they worked with were being referred. It cannot be determined if the population the respondents are working with are eligible for the classes, however, there is indication enough that respondents are concerned that the youth are not getting access to the services. Moreover, 36.4% of the professionals indicated that 25% or less of the youth enrolled in life skills classes completed the curriculum, while 34.5% responded that none of the youth they served completed the curriculum. Most notable is that only 3.6% of the professionals

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<sup>5</sup> DYFS Adolescent Service Guide, p. 5.

perceive that more than 75% of the youth complete their life skills program. A vast majority of the professionals (86.2%) reported that there not a sufficient number of life skills classes to meet demand.

These results are extremely concerning and strongly indicate the need for further study. Although the majority of the youth relate that they know about life skills classes, they report that they are unaware that these classes are available to them, and they are not being referred to the classes. Those who are being referred are sharing that they are not finishing them. According to DYFS policy 1010.17 and the DYFS Adolescent Service Guide, wraparound funds are administered through the after care programs, and it is recommended that adolescents complete life skills training before being referred for this service. Therefore, many adolescents who do not complete their life skills classes are not able to access wrap around funds for necessities when they are accepted into an aftercare program.

### **After Care Programming**

After Care programs are case management agencies, designed to assist and support those youth, ages 18-21, who are or were in DYFS care. These agencies provide youth assistance with obtaining employment, housing, post-secondary education and guidance as they transition to independence. Originally they were set up to work with youth once their case closed at age 18. Because DYFS cases now remain open until the age of 21, the After Care agencies currently serve youth irrespective of the status of the youth's DYFS case. More than half of the youth surveyed (51.4%) were aware of aftercare services. Unfortunately, 78.5% of the youth, who are over the age of 18, reported that they are not involved in an aftercare agency. Only 21.5% of those youth surveyed, who were over the age of 18, stated that they were currently in an aftercare program.

The professionals surveyed had a similar perception of the youth and their participation in after care services. Of those responding, 37.7% of professionals indicated that up to 25% of the youth they worked with were being referred to these services. Moreover, 19.7% of the professionals responded that none of their youth were being referred. Only 9% stated that over 75% of the youth they worked with were being referred to aftercare programs.

One of the resources that After Care programs provide to youth who are open DYFS cases is Chaffee Wrap Around funds. A youth who has completed their life skills program and is involved in an after care program that is contracted by DYFS may access up to \$4000 in Chafee wrap around funds for transitional needs, where there is no other source of funding. However, a youth's ability to receive any of these funds appears to be limited. Only 22% of youth involved in an after care program reported receiving funds through the aftercare agency. These funds were used in a variety of ways including, driving lessons, clothing, and transportation, such as car insurance and auto repair. Of the responding professionals, 45.6% stated that none of the youth they work with received these funds. Another 36.9% indicated this was true for up to 25% of their youth, while 10.7% responded that this is the case for 25-50% of the youth, and 4.9% stated this was the case for 50-75% of the youth. It was not clear from the survey as to the status of the survey participants in terms of DYFS involvement, therefore, consideration should be given to pursuing further study in this area of concern.

### **ADDITIONAL RESPONSES**

Each survey gave the participants an opportunity to expand on or explain some of their answers. There also were open-ended questions asked to gain additional, more experiential-based information that may not have been covered by the short-answer questions. Below, is a summary of these responses.

## **Youth Responses**

The narrative responses from the youth were heartfelt, inspiring, and descriptive. They provide additional and more detailed insight into the perceptions, experiences, and feelings of youth who are transitioning out of foster care into adulthood. The Panel is extremely grateful to all of the youth who took the time to respond and share some of their thoughts and experiences.

When asked about what they wanted their futures to look like in five years, almost all described a life where they were happy and successful. Many discussed plans to go to college, and many others saw themselves working in jobs that required at least a college degree, if not higher. Overwhelmingly, when asked about what would help them achieve their future goals, concerns about education and finances dominated. Roughly half of the youth stated in one form or another that they required assistance and support with obtaining their post secondary educations. Approximately half of the youth also stated that they needed money, support, and/or a job. Finally, the youth were asked to share any other comments that they wished. Of the 21 youth who elected to do so, many either expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the support they received from DYFS.

For example, some youth were very appreciative of DYFS intervention and the support they had received from DYFS, both financial and otherwise.

*Being in DYFS has been the best thing that ever happened to me actually. As I transition into better things and more situations come my way, I just want to be able to handle them.*

*Thank you for everything.*

*Even though this scholarship is ending in June giving me assistance with my rent, groceries, and such, I have to say it helped me through the bad times when I needed to make ends meet with my bills when I wasn't getting any hours at work. So thank you everyone for all your help.*

However, a greater number of youth expressed disappointment with DYFS. These frustrations included concerns about a lack of services and programs, insufficient support, and a sense of apathy on the part of individual DYFS case managers.

*DYFS should hire people that want to help kids not people that just need a job.*

*I wish DYFS would help me get an apartment but without getting on welfare and help me find a job that can support me.*

*I feel that DYFS makes many children unsuccessful.*

*Please make sure DYFS hires caseworkers that actually care about the kids involved.*

*DYFS should build relationships with agencies that provide affordable housing so that when you age out of foster care you will be able to find living arrangements that you can afford.*

*The DYFS system was extremely terrible on me and my younger siblings. We did not deserve to be treated the way that we were. Our case was open for 9 years. 5 of us suffered because of the injustices and laziness some wanted to inflict. And it was wrong, so wrong, and that is why I've become an advocate today. I want to make it better, it still sucks.*

### **Professional Responses**

The professionals were asked to respond to several open-ended questions designed to glean their observations relating to their work with transitioning youth. Professionals were asked to identify the top three barriers involved in their work with transitioning youth and most stated that the transition would be easier for the youth if their basic needs, such as housing, transportation, education, and job skills, were met. Some responses include:

*Transitioning youth are very frequently denied therapy. A youth has to act-out verbally or physically before their program case manager feels that therapy is warranted. Introverted youth (who internalize their feelings) go without therapy. Often, some of the barriers to these youth searching for and keeping jobs are rooted in issues that need to be addressed therapeutically.*

*DYFS closing out children too soon or not following through with their roles and responsibilities*

*It is important to find mentors, especially those who can be contracted for an appropriate amount of time, i.e., longer than three months. Securing a mentor for a one year minimum would be preferable.*

*We must have services to meet the youth's specific needs for young adults and not cookie cutter services designed for everyone involved in the system.*

Professionals responded passionately when asked about the greatest need for transitioning youth. Most expressed concern over their inability to prepare youth for independence and a lack of life skills on the part of the youth. Moreover, 39% of professionals stressed that DYFS, in one capacity or another did not fulfill their obligation with transitioning youth. They indicated that, in some instances, there is a lack of cooperation between DYFS and other community agencies. Furthermore, the professionals stressed the fact that inexperienced DYFS workers, who are not familiar with the law or services, impact transitioning youth negatively. Other issues include premature closing of cases, inadequate case plans, case plans developed too late, and a lack of communication between DYFS workers, the family and the youth.

*Youth need knowledgeable, involved and available case workers/mentors to help them navigate through the system especially if college bound. If a young person is unable to complete a transitional living program for whatever reason, it becomes very difficult for them to obtain necessary aging out services.*

*They need support systems in the community.*

*The greatest need is for the young adults to be made completely aware of what is available to them as far as the aging out process. Continuing education should be stressed as extremely important for their future.*

Eighteen percent of the respondents stressed the importance of services designed to meet the educational needs of transitioning youth. These professionals indicated that youth who were developmentally delayed did not have access to any educational

services especially those programs designed to promote skill development. Additionally the educational programs that do exist are understaffed and suffer from the oversight necessary to ensure that the programs were offering quality services.

*So many of them don't finish high school and/or pass the GED and no one is there to refocus them and stress the importance of finishing that level of education. If more of them finished high school, more would go to college or at least be eligible for more employment opportunities. I don't even see caseworkers encouraging these kids to go for some sort of vocational training even if higher education is not an option for them.*

*Once they turn 18 and they have completed some form of training/educational classes, we send them out into the world without the proper life skills training for them to be successful in life.*

*Assistance seems optional for the youth and poorly executed even when requested. Youth often go for months without any discussions with their coordinator. Most youth do not know how to cook for themselves because they are only taught if they request assistance (there are no mandatory classes). There needs to be some way that the State can ensure that these services are actually being provided, and that some services are mandatory for the youth.*

Approximately 21% of respondents indicated that transitioning youth need mentoring services as well as a significant adult who can provide consistent long term support. The professionals specifically identified the need for mentoring services such as counseling, substance abuse treatment and case management.

*Adult mentors and models who support and care for the youth.*

*Appropriate career counseling, training, help with resumes and placement, and continuing interest from one or more competent and caring adults, including (grown children) who have succeeded somehow in the foster system.*

*Self advocacy training and support especially around addressing disability and special healthcare and emotional needs.*

The professionals also cited other barriers to services, such as insufficient funds, lack of employment opportunities, inadequate follow-up services, and the need for medical assistance. Finally, the professionals were asked about the top three assets that would support their work with transitioning youth.

*An educated, adolescent-specific-trained DYFS caseworker, CASA and a caring adult at home (whether it is a group home, foster home or birth home) to follow up with them daily.*

*CASA involvement!*

*Patience, adequate effective resources and access to the same!*

*Knowledge and skills of our transition staff, connections to the community providers and state agencies funding to provide individual advocacy.*

### **Additional Information**

When looking at an overview of services, the professionals were asked about their experiences with youth on a variety of subjects ranging from life skills and after-care to peer support and mental health services. The response choices were “Does Not Exist”, “Not Enough”, “Almost Enough”, “Not Accessible” and “Working Well”. Below, the responses for the following categories are recorded. Clearly, the professionals feel that there are not sufficient services in place to meet the needs of youth transitioning out of the DYFS system.

***Life skills:*** Out of 154 responses, 70.1% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 15.6% choose “Almost Enough”, 9.7% choose “ Working Well”, 4.5% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 2.6% choose “Does Not Exist”.

***After Care:*** Out of 145 responses, 66.9% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 13.8% choose “Almost Enough”, 9.7% choose “ Working Well”, 8.3% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 5.5% choose “Does Not Exist”

**Wrap Around Funds:** Out of 141 responses, 51.8% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 20.6% choose “Almost Enough”, 20.6% choose “Working Well”, 5.0% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 4.3% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Housing:** Out of 142 responses, 69% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 11.3% choose “Does Not Exist” 9.2% choose “Almost Enough”, 9.7% choose “Working Well” and 7.7% indicated they were “Not Accessible”.

**Housing Assistance:** Out of 142 responses, 69% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 13.4% choose “Almost Enough”, 6.3% indicated they were “Not Accessible”, 9.9% choose “Does Not Exist” and 5.6% choose “Working Well”.

**Residential Care:** Out of 140 responses, 53.6% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 29.3% choose “Almost Enough”, 11.4% choose “Working Well”, 5.7% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 2.9% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Medical and Dental Insurance:** Out of 135 responses, 38.5% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 33.3% choose “Almost Enough”, 20.0% choose “Working Well”, 5.2% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 5.2% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Regular Medical/Dental Care:** Out of 138 responses, 44.9% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 29.7% choose “Almost Enough”, 17.4% choose “Working Well”, 7.2% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 3.6% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Medical Dental Home:** Out of 115 responses, 46.1% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 23.5% choose “Almost Enough”, 13% choose “Working Well”, 13.0% choose “Does Not Exist” and 8.7% indicated they were “Not Accessible”.

**Pregnancy Needs:** Out of 127 responses, 48.8% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 29.9% choose “Almost Enough”, 13.4% choose “Working Well”, 5.5% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 3.9% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Transportation:** Out of 144 responses, 55.6% professionals indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 16.7% choose “Almost Enough”, 14.6% choose “Does Not Exist”, 9.0% choose “Working Well” and 5.6% indicated they were “Not Accessible”.

**Education Support:** Out of 147 responses, 53.1% professionals indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 25.2% choose “Almost Enough”, 15.0%, choose “Working Well”, 5.4% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 4.1% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Peer Support:** Out of 136 responses, 63.2% professionals indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 15.4% choose “Does Not Exist”, 14.7% choose “Almost Enough”, 5.1% choose “Working Well”, and 3.7% indicated they were “Not Accessible”.

**Job Search Readiness Programs:** Out of 139 responses, 69.1% indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 15.1% choose “Does Not Exist”, 9.4% choose “Almost Enough”, 4.3% choose “Working Well” and 3.6% indicated they were “Not Accessible”.

**Mental Health Services:** Out of 147 responses, 55.1% professionals indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 26.5% choose “Almost Enough”, 14.3% choose “Working Well”, 4.1% responded “Not Accessible” and 2.7% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Addiction Related Needs:** Out of 137 responses, 60.6% professionals indicated that they were “Not Enough”, 22.6% choose “Almost Enough”, 10.9% choose “Working Well”, 4.4% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 4.4% choose “Does Not Exist”.

**Case Management/Social Work:** Out of 148 responses, 48.6% professionals responded “Not Enough”, 25.0% choose “Almost Enough”, 21.6% choose “Working Well”, 4.1% indicated they were “Not Accessible” and 3.4% choose “Does Not Exist”.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Currently, DYFS policy instructs that unless a youth affirmatively asks for his/her case to be closed or repeatedly fails to cooperate with DYFS services, the youth's DYFS case should remain open until the youth's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Yet, despite this policy, many cases are being closed at 18 years of age, and prior to age 21. In sum, practice appears to differ from stated policy. As a result, the Panel recommends that an outside entity, which includes youth, be created to monitor DYFS case closure policy and practice. Such an entity would be charged with determining if there is a discrepancy between policy and practice. Moreover, until it can be verified that the case closure policy is being followed, there should be a moratorium on case closures.
2. Many vulnerable youth whose cases were closed at 18, or even earlier, seek to reopen their DYFS cases in order to receive necessary and critical services and assistance. Yet, DYFS policy is at best unclear as to whether and when a youth can be permitted to reopen his/her case. Accordingly, some youth successfully re-establish their relationship with DYFS, and others are shut out. The Panel recommends that DYFS re-visit their policy to ensure that it is clear that all youth who choose to close their DYFS cases, and then find themselves in need of assistance, can reopen their cases and receive the necessary assistance. Such policies need to be strengthened so that the needs of the youth are recognized and supported.
3. The survey points to an insufficient supply of housing and an inadequate variety of housing options to meet the individual needs of the youth. The

Panel recommends that the following actions steps be taken to improve the quality and quantity of housing options available for transitioning youth.

- a. Evaluate current housing contracts and ensure that current expenditures are being used most effectively
  - b. Develop an increased array and continuum of housing options for aging out youth from least to most restrictive, considering the special needs of many of the youth.
  - c. Increase the availability of each type of housing option (i.e., transitional living programs, group homes, longer term subsidized housing options)
  - d. Increase the stipend awarded for those youth who find their housing and seek the independent living stipend. It has not been increased since the 1980's. Currently, a youth can receive \$45 per week for rent, and \$40 per week for food. Given the insufficient number of "beds" available through DYFS contracted housing programs, it is essential that there be another avenue for youth to secure affordable housing.
4. Life skills classes and training help youth to be better able to independently live and function as an adult. The completion of life skills classes also is a requirement for the receipt of Chafee Wrap-Around funds. Yet, as the survey results indicate, there are an insufficient number of spots in life skills classes to meet the needs of the youth. Demand far exceeds the number of available spots. The Panel recommends that DCF increase the availability of life skills classes available to the youth.
5. Concomitantly, too many youth are unable to avail themselves of the services of after care programs. Yet, only youth enrolled in after care programs are able to access Chafee Wrap-Around funds. Thus, many youth are never able to access this financial assistance. The policy of referring youth to after care programs for ongoing case management and the ability to access Wrap Around funds predates the policy that DYFS must now keep most cases open

until the youth turns 21. The Panel recommends that additional after care slots immediately be made available. Additionally, it is recommended that DCF explore whether the administration of the Chafee Wrap Around funds is best managed by the after care programs or whether DCF and DYFS should take over this responsibility. Finally DCF ought to assess whether there is a duplication of case management services when there is a DYFS case open and the youth also is being assisted by a case manager from an after care program. However, currently, the referral to after care is the only way to access the Wrap Around funds.

6. While a vast majority of the youth stated that they were in touch with family members and that there were adults in their lives who they felt cared about them, the adults and professionals in the lives of the children need to be more proactive and work together. Accordingly, the Panel recommends the following:
  - a. DYFS, DCBHS, and the JJC need to work more collaboratively with one another to meet the needs of the youth. Many youth interface with more than one agency. However, the agencies do not interact with one another, and often the youth are fall between the cracks.
  - b. The courts need to be more vigilant in its oversight of this vulnerable population by holding DYFS accountable for complying with its own policies. For example, courts should request to see a youth's transitional plan. The court should not terminate its interest unless it is presented with solid and clear evidence that the youth is stable and his/her needs are being met.
  - c. All of the professionals who work with the youth need to assist the youth in advocating for their educational and vocational needs. Accordingly, these professionals need to be fully informed of the educational opportunities available to aging out youth and the rights and entitlements of youth who are classified.