



Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative: Child Welfare 101

Introduction to FYI

The Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative makes Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) assistance available to Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) in partnership with Public Child Welfare Agencies (PCWAs). Under FYI, PHAs provide housing assistance on behalf of: Youth at least 18 years and not more than 24 years of age (have not reached their 25th birthday) who left foster care, or will leave foster care within 90 days, in accordance with a transition plan described in Section 475(5)(H) of the Social Security Act and are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless at age 16 or older. FYI vouchers cannot exclude eligible youth with children or who are pregnant, consistent with the nondiscrimination requirements of the Fair Housing Act.

As required by statute, an FYI voucher issued to such a youth may only be used to provide housing assistance for the youth for a maximum of 36 months.¹ In addition to providing up to 36 months of rental assistance, youth must be provided supportive services to assist the young person on their path to self-sufficiency.

PHAs administer FYI in partnership with PCWAs who are responsible for identifying youth and certifying that they meet the FYI eligibility criteria listed above and referring them to the PHA for determination of eligibility for HCV assistance.² HUD awards FYI vouchers to PHAs through competitive and non-competitive processes. Under the FYI competitive program, a referral of a youth to FYI is triggered when the PHA notifies the PCWA of voucher availability. PCWAs must provide referral(s) for the available vouchers within 30 working days of being notified by the PHA of voucher availability. PCWAs and PHAs should be communicating regularly about the availability of FYI vouchers. In the non-competitive program, the PCWA will make the referral of a youth to the PHA first. The PHA will then apply to HUD for the voucher(s) and HUD will review applications in the order received. The application process requires specific partnerships and roles, as documented in a formal partnership agreement between a PHA and PCWA. The PHA is also encouraged to partner with the local Continuum of Care (CoC) to help identify eligible youth not in the PCWA's caseload. Youth use the FYI vouchers to lease decent, safe, and sanitary housing in local communities. PHAs may provide FYI as tenant-based and/or project-based housing voucher assistance.³ A tenant-based FYI voucher is assigned to an eligible youth and can transfer with the

¹ The Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities (FSHO) amendments (Section 103 of Division Q of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (Pub. L. 116-260)) provides FYI youth with an extension of the 36-month time limit for up to an additional 24 months if they meet certain requirements. FSHO applies to FYI youth who first leased or leases a unit after the date of enactment of FSHO, December 27, 2020. HUD published an FSHO implementation notice in the Federal Register on January 24, 2022 (87 FR 3570).

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/01/24/2022-01285/implementation-of-thefostering-stable-housing-opportunities-amendments>

² Notice PIH 2023-04 provides more details on the roles and responsibilities of the PCWAs. Notice PIH 2023-04 is accessible at the following link: <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/2023PIH04.pdf>

³ All FYI vouchers can be project-based except FYI TPVs awarded under Notice PIH 2019-20.

tenant as they move to a qualified housing unit. A project-based FYI voucher is committed to units within specific housing developments to serve eligible households that move into the units with project-based vouchers.

Introduction

This topic guide provides PHAs with an easy-to-use overview of child welfare in the U.S. This guide starts with an explanation of what child welfare systems look like, as well as the typical process systems follow to keep children safe. Next, there are explanations of key child welfare legislation, with a particular focus on the aspects of the laws that affect older youth and youth aging out of foster care, and therefore relate to the FYI initiative. Lastly, to connect the formal systems to the populations served by the systems, this guide provides information about youth exiting foster care, for whom the FYI Initiative exists.

Overview of Child Welfare Systems

The Child Welfare system in the U.S. is a collection of systems, with the aim to keep children and families safe. Child welfare operates at both a federal and state level, with primary responsibility falling within states and the federal government supporting states through funding and legislative initiatives.

Child welfare systems are not a single entity, rather they are comprised of many organizations in each community working together to strengthen families and keep children safe. The systems provide a group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families. Public agencies within states, for example departments of social services or child and family services, often contract with private organizations to provide services to families, such as in-home family preservation services, foster care, residential treatment, mental health care, substance use treatment, parenting skills classes, domestic violence services, employment assistance, and financial or housing assistance.⁴

While there are federal laws and commonalities across all child welfare systems in the country, specific procedures, protocols, and programs vary widely by state. Each state has its own laws that define abuse and neglect, the reporting obligations of individuals, and the required state and local CPS (Child Protective Service) interventions.

Overview of Child Welfare Process

Across the vast numbers of systems and organizations providing child welfare services, child welfare systems typically follow this general process:



⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. "Child Protective Services (CPS) In-Home Services Workers: Engaging Nonresident Fathers." Available at: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/cpswork.pdf>.

Investigation

If a person in the community suspects child abuse or neglect, they can report that concern to the child protective system (specific processes vary by state). Reports can come from any concerned person, but most are made by people called “mandatory reporters,” who are individuals required under state law to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. When a report is received, it is screened in or out, depending on whether there is enough information to suggest an investigation should be conducted. If a report is screened in, an investigation is opened into whether or not a child has been abused and/or neglected. The investigation often includes speaking with various people who have had contact with the child and family, and possibly with the child. At the end of the investigation, a determination is made whether there is enough evidence to support claims of abuse and/or neglect.

Support Families

Depending on the findings of the investigation, support services and resources may be offered, and at times required, for families. Support services to families vary and should be tailored to meet a family’s specific needs and circumstances, and might include services such as parent skill training, childcare, housing needs, substance use and mental health counseling, in-home services, or respite and crisis care services. For families for whom lack of adequate housing is a primary factor contributing to the possibility of children being placed in out-of-home care, PCWAs can help a family obtain a Housing Choice Voucher under the Family Unification Program (FUP), if there is a PHA that administers FUP in their area.⁵

Provide Temporary Placements for Children

If the risk of child abuse and/or neglect is considered to be high, the child may be removed from their home and placed with a relative or in foster care. Such placements are meant to be temporary, while parents continue to receive services to reduce the risk of child maltreatment in the future. During this time, children may continue to visit with their parents. While a child is placed outside of their parents’ home, the family is working toward a permanency plan, with the typical plan focused on reunifying a child with their parents.

Family Reunification

An ideal outcome for children removed from their homes is to return safely to live with their parents. When a family achieves the goals set forth in a permanency plan and the risk of future maltreatment has dissipated, a child should be reunified with their family and return home. In some cases, however, the efforts toward reunification are not successful and plans may be changed to another permanent arrangement, such as adoption or transfer of custody to a relative.

There are some cases where youth are not reunified with their family, and do not find another permanent arrangement. In such cases, youth are offered support services to prepare them for independent living. Child welfare systems start trying to prepare young people, sometimes as early as 12 years old, for independent living because it is often more difficult to find foster homes for adolescents 12 and older, and the chances of being adopted decrease.

The FYI initiative is targeted at these young people who were unable to return home and/or consider other permanent arrangements- like adoption.

⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "Housing Choice Voucher Program - Family." https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family

Child Welfare Legislation

The primary responsibility for child welfare services sits with the states, with each state having its own legal and administrative structure and programs to address the needs of children and families. But states must comply with Federal requirements and guidelines to be eligible for Federal funding under certain programs.

Since the 1970s, several laws have been implemented that have had a significant impact on child protection and child welfare services at the state level. Legislation requires Federal departments and agencies (e.g., the Children's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) to issue or amend Federal policy and regulation. New legislation also prompts responses at the state level, including enactment of state legislation, development or revision of state agency policy and regulations, and implementation of new programs.

The largest federally funded programs that support state and tribal efforts for child welfare, foster care, and adoption activities are authorized under titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act. Many of the legislative acts have included specific components aimed at supporting youth exiting, or at risk of exiting, the foster system without having achieved legal permanency (e.g., reunification or adoption), and are described below.

Foster Care Independence Act of 1999

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which provided states with flexible funding to assist children likely to "age out" of the foster care system at age 18. This act supports these young people by providing financial resources for independent living services up to age 21.⁶ Services vary by jurisdiction but usually include financial education, mentoring, post-secondary preparation, and tutoring. Eligibility for the program, as outlined in federal law, includes:

- Youth in foster care, ages 14 and older
- Young people in or formerly in foster care, ages 18 to 21, or 23 in some jurisdictions
- Youth who left foster care through adoption or guardianship at age 16 or older
- Youth "likely to age out of foster care" to receive assistance to participate in age appropriate and normative activities.⁷

This Act also created the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), which provides researchers and policymakers with administrative data on service utilization, and survey data on young people's experiences transitioning out of foster care.

⁶ National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. (2002) "Chafee Foster Care Independence Program: An Overview." <https://www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ChafeeBrief.pdf>.

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. "John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program" <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/grant-funding/john-h-chafee-foster-care-independence-program>.

Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act (2001)

The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act aimed at preventing child maltreatment, enabling children to remain safely with their families and ensuring permanency for children in foster care.⁸ The legislation authorizes grants to states for promoting safe and stable families through the development, expansion, and operation of coordinated programs of community-based family support services, family preservation services, time-limited family reunification services, and adoption promotion and support services.⁹

Within this act, the Education Training and Voucher (ETV) program was authorized as part of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to provide education and training, including postsecondary training and education, to youth who are in or have aged out of foster care. Eligible youth can obtain up to \$5,000 each year to attend an institution of higher education.

Fostering Connections to Success And Increasing Adoptions Act (2008)

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was designed to promote permanent families for children and youth in foster care through relative guardianship and adoption, improving health care, and supporting educational stability.¹⁰ For older youth, specifically, this act provided additional federal guidance and expanded funding to states that extend foster care past age 18. It enables older youth to remain in foster care through their 21st birthday if:

- They are enrolled in high school or post-secondary education
- They are employed or participating in an employment training program
- They are unable to meet criteria due to disability

This legislation also allowed states to decide whether to use federal funds for extended foster care. To learn about how, if at all, a state implements extended foster care, one can use the Juvenile Law Center's [Extended Foster Care Tool](#), and/or contact the state's child welfare agency for information about available programs.

The Family First Prevention Services Act (2018)

The purpose of the Family First Prevention Services Act was to shift the focus of the child welfare system towards keeping children safely with their families, rather than separation through out-of-home care. This law provides families with increased access to services that can support their ability to safely care for their children, including mental health services, substance use treatment, and/or parenting skills courses. For older youth in care, this law amended the age eligibility requirements of Chafee to include all youth ages 14 to 23 who are either in or have aged out of out of foster care. The law is intended to encourage states

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. "Program Instruction: Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood - Final Rule."

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/pi0306.pdf>

⁹ US Congress Washington, DC (2001) Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001. House of Representatives Bill Number 2873, 107th Congress, 1st Session. [Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 -- House of Representatives Bill Number 2873, 107th Congress, 1st Session](#)

¹⁰ US Congress Washington, DC (2008) Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. Public Law 110-351 110th Congress. [PUBL351.PS \(govinfo.gov\)](#).

to provide independent living services to young people regardless of whether they are involved in extended foster care.¹¹

Implications of Legislation on FYI Initiative

Familiarity with child welfare legislation, particularly that which impacts older youth in care, is valuable for those administering the Foster Youth to Independence Initiative. As outlined above, legislation has provided extended support for youth of older age, and practitioners and organizations administering FYI vouchers should be aware of the implications and intersections of child welfare laws, programs, and resources.

The legislation can help inform understanding of eligibility for FYI vouchers. Youth currently participating in the Title IV-E foster care program are not eligible for the FYI initiative, as they must have left foster care (or be leaving within 90 days) to be eligible for FYI. Youth receiving ETV funds may, however, be eligible for FYI assistance if they have left foster care and meet the FYI initiative's other eligibility requirements. PCWAs can help eligible youth access ETV funds to use toward education and training, which aligns with the requirement of PCWAs to provide supportive services.

For program administrators, NYTD data can be a valuable resource for understanding and determining the need in any state to initiate and/or target the FYI vouchers. This data can help PHAs and PCWAs identify trends and disparities in outcomes among former foster youth, including housing stability, rates of homelessness, and housing challenges after exiting foster care. Data can be broken down by county, which can help PHAs determine the need for FYI vouchers in their area.

Given the eligibility requirements of FYI, it is important for PCWAs and PHAs to support young people at the right time to ensure stable housing after they age out of foster care. PHAs should work with PCWAs to help them understand the process for applying for a voucher, as well as for finding housing once obtaining the voucher. This can help PCWAs determine proper timelines to introduce conversations about housing options and complete applications and paperwork with youth in advance of the date they age out of care.

While staff within PCWAs determine eligibility of youth for the FYI initiative, it is important that partners within PHAs have shared understanding of who these vouchers are for.

Understanding the FYI Target Population

While it is essential to understand the legislative and procedural aspects of child welfare to administer the FYI initiative, it is also extremely important to understand the experiences of the individuals for whom FYI exists.

Young people who are in or have left the foster care system have often spent much of their lives moving from one home to another. This transience not only means new homes, but also new schools, and new people coming in and out of their lives frequently, including social workers and other service providers. In turn, as result of these experiences, many youth experience disruptions in relationships, both personal as well as with service providers, which can lead to a lack of trust.

¹¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway. Family First Prevention Services. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau.
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/federal/family-first/>

As much of their life has been shaped by trauma and transience, young people exiting foster care have often been focused on survival and acclimating to new environments. For older youth, there may be a sense of lacking direction and ability to plan for the future. Some of this also stems from having limited opportunity as youth to make decisions about their own lives.

There are commonalities and trends across all systems, but it is important to remember that each young person has a different experience, often shaped largely on where they are, the resources they are able to access, and the caseworker(s) to whom they are assigned.

Outcomes For Youth

While experiences vary, and each individual has a unique story, young people who age out of foster care are at higher risk of negative outcomes, largely due to many of the experiences described above.

Young people who leave foster care unprepared to live on their own are at risk of becoming homeless soon after discharge. According to NYTD data, 27% of 21-year-olds surveyed in 2018 reported experiencing homelessness within the previous two years.¹²

Additionally, young people who age out of foster care are more likely than other youth to:

1. Be involved with the justice system.
2. Develop substance dependence.
3. Become pregnant by 21 years old.
4. Experience unemployment.¹³

Implications for FYI Initiative

The experiences of youth aging out of foster care and the increased risk of experiencing homelessness highlight the necessity and importance of the FYI initiative. The needs for this population differ than other populations PHAs serve, and to have successful outcomes, it is valuable to understand the child welfare systems they have interacted with, as well as the unique experiences, attributes, and circumstances of youth aging out of foster care to serve them appropriately. PHAs interested in the program or currently administering FYI vouchers are strongly encouraged to review the information presented in the rest of the FYI topic guides, especially on the topic of youth engagement.

Resources

- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2020). *How the child welfare system works*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/cpswork>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. "Program Instruction: Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood - Final Rule <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/pi0306.pdf>
- Department of Housing and Urban Development. (n.d.). Housing Choice Voucher Program - Family. https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family

¹² National Youth in Transition Database (2019) Highlights from the NYTD Survey: Outcomes reported by young people at ages 17, 19, and 21 (Cohort 2). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. [NYTD Data Brief #7, November 2019 \(hhs.gov\)](https://www.hhs.gov/nytd/data-brief-7-november-2019)

¹³ [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#)

- National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. "Chafee Foster Care Independence Program: An Overview <https://www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ChafeeBrief.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (n.d.). John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Retrieved August 15, 2023, from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/grant-funding/john-h-chafee-foster-care-independence-program>
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- Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative - The Annie E. Casey Foundation \(aecf.org\)](#)
- Juvenile Law Center. (n.d.). Foster Care. <https://jlc.org/foster-care#paragraph-863>

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