



Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative: Engaging Persons with Lived Experience

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. 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 tenant as they move to

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-the-fostering-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.

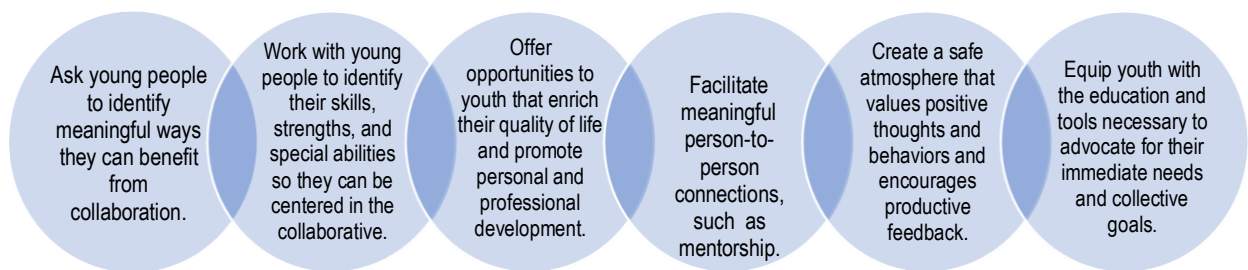
a qualified housing unit. A project-based FYI voucher is committed to units within specific housing developments to serve eligible households that move into the units with project-based vouchers.

Engaging Youth with Lived Experience

Engaging youths with lived experiences of homelessness, child welfare involvement, and voucher program participation in areas of program development, implementation, and ongoing program operations and evaluation is crucial to the success of the FYI program. Insights provided by youth with lived experience can help inform the design and delivery of a more equitable, efficient and effective program that not only increases youth identification, referral and voucher utilization but also streamlines and fortifies the partnerships among the PCWA, the PHA and the CoC or other community partners, as applicable, to generate long-term community impact. Soliciting input or feedback from FYI youth consistently can also lead to the identification of gaps and resources, as well as process improvements through innovative and collaborative problem-solving. Ultimately, engaging FYI youths and treating them as valued and equal partners in making decisions that affect their lives is a form of empowerment and capacity building that can help them better advocate for their current and future realities. Involving FYI youths requires openness and intentional investment for improvements at all levels within the partnering agencies. Many staff and agencies often support the values and understand the positive impacts of engaging people with lived experience but struggle to operationalize meaningful engagement. This guide discusses strategies for effective input from and communication with youths with lived experience accessing and participating in the FYI program.

Striving for Authentic Youth Collaboration

Meaningful engagement with FYI youths should start with the recognition that the young people seeking or receiving services are not merely beneficiaries, but valuable contributors. They bring knowledge, skills, and insights based on their lived experience to the policies, programs, and practices that partnering agencies are developing to help increase program participant buy-in, retention and engagement. When engaging youth with lived experience, the most fundamental and crucial step is to establish authentic youth and adult collaboration that is rooted in equity. In this dynamic, young people are empowered and equipped to take initiative, drive the discussion, and decisions are made in partnership with adults. The following illustration outlines steps that PHAs and partnering agencies can adopt in developing authentic youth collaboration.



When it comes to planning for supportive services for the FYI youth, incorporating youth input can result in more successful services:

- 1) Incorporating youth perspectives can lead to offering services that are more likely to appeal to FYI youth, which can improve enrollment and participation.

- 2) Involving youth in planning can improve the quality of services proposed. They understand the range of challenges youth in foster care face—and the strengths they possess—in ways that professionals without personal experience may not. FYI youth can also provide a reality check regarding the feasibility and appropriateness of planned services.
- 3) Offering an intervention young people helped design can increase its credibility with the target population.

When it comes to evaluating program performance, having consistent, transparent and effective communication with FYI program participants is a critical strategy. Youths entering into the program and current program participants as well as those who are transitioning out of the FYI program should all be given the opportunity to provide input and feedback to help guide the program development, implementation and refinement process. To ensure full utilization of available vouchers and access to all the applicable supportive services and to improve youth engagement at the agency level, agency staff should connect with youth regularly to seek their input and describe the intended and potential use of the information collected. Agencies should inform youth of the progress and outcome(s) of any process in which they have participated and the next steps. This encourages youth to continue to connect with the engagement process, builds trust, and strengthens relationships established during the process. Consistent communication, whether through listening sessions, focus groups, or one-on-one interactions, also provides an opportunity for youth to give feedback regarding their participation and suggest areas for improvement. Agency staff should make a sustained effort to continue to actively listen to youth and incorporate their perspectives into system improvements.

Pathways to Meaningful Youth Engagement

FYI youths can serve as a source of organizational expertise when included as consultants, trainers, or employees. They can help design policy and training curriculum, metrics for program evaluation and foster a culture and climate that promote engagement of people with lived experience at all levels of an organization. Their services and contribution should be properly acknowledged and compensated to ensure equity and long-term engagement.

FYI youths joining committees and advisory boards.

Youth with lived experience can serve on a regularly scheduled committee or board (e.g., youth advisory body/board) to help inform operations, process and continuous quality improvement. This is a frequently used strategy to gain feedback and input into ongoing program implementation. Initial orientation and ongoing education and training for FYI youths can promote their meaningful engagement with boards and committees, addressing topics such as agency structure, budget and finance, requirements regarding confidentiality, consensus, and other decision-making processes, group facilitation, and conflict resolution.

FYI youths as speakers and trainers. Given the proper coaching and capacity building, FYI youths can be equipped to confidently and competently deliver virtual and/or in-person sessions such as a training, webinar, or conference to share their lived experience with a wide audience covering various FYI related

Case Study – The PCWA of Jefferson County, CO secured funding to hire an additional Chafee Program Case Manager. The program administrators were intentional about engaging a FYI youth as one of the interview panelists. This young person was asked to draft her own interview questions based on her knowledge of youth needs as well as personal experiences as a current program participant. She was also included in the design of the scoring system and the final decision-making process. She participated in a total of 8 interviews to help the organization select the most qualified

topics. Providing opportunities for FYI youths to speak authentically and directly about issues that matter to them can help raise public awareness and garner support for the FYI program. Youths are also empowered through the process as they can work to improve skills such as public speaking, curriculum design, facilitation, self-advocacy and more.

FYI youths serving on hiring committees. Young adults with lived experience of homelessness and/or child welfare involvement bring a distinct and invaluable lens to their experience with human services. This perspective is extremely helpful in developing more equitable, effective, and efficient programs and in facilitating more positive voucher program participant experiences. FYI youths are uniquely well-suited to influence and design programs, processes, policies, and practices that best meet the real-life, on-the-ground needs and preferences of FYI program participants, to whom they can personally relate. Having FYI youth on the agency's hiring committee can also ensure that the organization is attracting and hiring candidates who are capable of addressing the needs of the FYI program participants in a person-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive manner.

Employment opportunities. Employment opportunities for FYI youths may include staff positions, internships, fellowships or any paid work over a set time with the PHA or the PWCA with a defined set of projects, professional development opportunities, and supervision. Youths can also be engaged as a consultant or subcontractor for a project or team that includes a consulting contract, defined deliverables, and payment terms. However, during the recruitment and hiring process, it is important to assess the applicant's skills instead of credentials. Organizations may consider removing requirements for particular educational degrees or certificates from job descriptions, since this common practice serves as a deterrent to many people with lived experience, especially young adults who are well-suited to the work but do not have specific credentials. Use plain language regarding the value of lived experience in all job descriptions. Advertise jobs and hold job fairs in places – virtually and in-person – where FYI youths are likely to see them.

Agencies with FYI youths as employees should educate and train staff at all levels about the values of lived experience and about how to relate to colleagues with that expertise. This could include hearing and learning directly from the youths if they want to disclose and discuss their experiences. Trainings should also cover other topics that will help youths feel more welcome in the workplace, such as cultural sensitivity and anti-racism, and any other topics they identify.

FYI youths as peer support staff. PHAs, PCWAs and other partnering agencies should consider engaging FYI youths, especially those who have experienced success through the program, as peer support staff. In this unique capacity, an FYI youth who has benefitted from the program to gain self-sufficiency is well suited to advocate for the program and encourage participation amongst their peers. Peer support staff understand how new program participants feel after they are housed and what it is like adjusting to a new home and a new community. Peers can offer practical help with basic needs and everyday living, such as finding the right grocery store or laundromat. Providing this meaningful and practical assistance with day-to-day struggles and offering effective and sustained support is the basis of a caring and trusting relationship, and hopefully serves as a model for developing other relationships. Agencies interested in this strategy should identify financial resources needed to establish and sustain this position and provide ongoing coaching and capacity building for the peer support staff.

Useful Tips to Consider

The development of long lasting and meaningful engagement with FYI youth takes time, investment and intentional efforts. Staff from partnering agencies are strongly encouraged to consider the following tips while engaging youths and leveraging them as organizational assets.

<p>Have the right people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate a shared commitment to working with young people through recruitment, training, and support of agency staff • Hire staff members that are accessible, connected to the target population, and eager to learn about and understand youth culture • Staff should receive appropriate training and agency support to work with youth and young adults as equal partners • Staff should collaborate with community partners to build a supportive environment for young people
<p>Use science and technology effectively</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply current, researched-based knowledge of adolescent brain development, trauma-informed care, and other relevant fields while collaborating with FYI youth • Make sure social media content generated is developmentally appropriate, current with technology trends, and reflective of youth experiences
<p>Be Honest, Clear, Flexible and Innovative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a risk-tolerant, empathetic, and patient approach that promotes creativity and allows youth to learn from mistakes • Share information in a clear and digestible manner with FYI youths and have honest conversations and clear expectations regarding roles and responsibilities • Be sure to promote creative ways to help youth and young adults feel engaged and included in decision-making
<p>Avoid Adulthood and Tokenism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adulthood happens when youth and young people are presumed to lack knowledge or experience because of their age and their ideas are dismissed. One example of this is through language. Consider the times when you have heard the phrase, "They're just kids." The term "kids" inherently diminishes the experiences of a person rather than referring to someone as a "young adult" or "young person", which sets a completely different tone. • Take intentional steps to avoid tokenism so there is no room for unintentional harm. Eliminate tokenism by recruiting more than one FYI youth and creating meaningful involvement. Invite young people to suggest ways in which they would like to contribute, and work to create an environment that actively engages and solicits the input of all members of the group, including those with differing communication capacities. • Evaluate the decision and decision-makers: Are FYI youths involved at each step? If they are being consulted, is it just to confirm bias/direction? Has the decision already been made before engagement? • Be clear about youths' roles in decision-making and conscious of power dynamics when engaging FYI youths.
<p>Compensate Young People Equitably</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnering agencies can compensate in a number of ways, including: 1) pay wages or honorariums at living-wage rates, 2) remunerate with gift cards, or 3) provide stipends to individuals upon completion of training programs. • The type of compensation provided should be defined locally and administered in a way that works for all parties, including funders and the recipients. Processes must conform to legal requirements and should protect recipients by considering tax implications. • For example, compensating recipients in cash may reduce barriers faced by people in accessing a bank account, such as a lack of ID and user fees. Account for check-cashing service fees and add that to compensation if checks must be used instead of cash. When possible, consult the recipients about compensation and methods of compensation and get their feedback about what options available might work best.

Resources

- HUD Webpage for Foster Youth to Independence
https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/fyi
- HUD Webpage for Family Unification Program
https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family
- Family Unification Program (FUP): Engaging Persons with Lived Experience Topic Guide (forthcoming)
- FYI Initiative Webinar Series: Youth Engagement
<https://www.hudexchange.info/trainings/courses/fyi-initiative-webinar-series-youth-engagement/>
- Youth Engagement Blueprint Series: Introduction
<https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/blue-print-introduction>
- Beyond Mere Principle: Strategies for Truly Partnering with People Who Have the Lived Experience in Our Work. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.
<https://www.usich.gov/news/beyond-mere-principle-strategies-for-truly-partnering-withpeople-who-have-the-lived-experience-in-our-work/>
- Avoiding Tokenism When Engaging Young People. C4 Center for Social Innovation.
https://c4innovates.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CDLWR-3476_YESS_TokenismTipSheet_v4.pdf
- Authentic Youth Engagement. The Annie E. Casey Foundation
<https://www.aecf.org/work/childwelfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/areas-of-expertise/authentic-youthengagement>
- Positive Youth Development. The Annie E. Casey Foundation
<https://www.aecf.org/topics/positive-youth-development>

This material is based upon work supported by funding under an award with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. Neither the United States Government, nor any of its employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately-owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the U.S. Government or any agency thereof. Opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, HUD or by any HUD program.