



Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative: Strategies for Engaging Youth Participants In Accessing Resources

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-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.

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.

The purpose of this guide is to aid FYI administrators, community leaders, and supportive service providers in developing practical and effective strategies for engaging FYI-eligible youth. The strategies provided intend to promote a sense of self-advocacy in program participants and encourage the utilization of program benefits by eligible youth to access the resources they need.

FYI Youth Engagement Guiding Principles

Successful youth outreach and engagement in FYI programs requires intentional, consistent, and reliable cross-system collaboration.⁴ The two guiding principles below provide a framework for developing successful engagement strategies that center on the evolving needs of FYI-eligible youth. These principles inform the engagement strategies offered in this guide and also serve as a foundation for FYI providers interested in developing their own engagement approaches.

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development is a holistic engagement approach that empowers youth to be self-sufficient by providing developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. FYI providers can leverage positive youth development by offering quality supportive services that empower program participants. Positive development allows youth to:

- forge positive relationships,
- strengthen their social and technical skills, and
- experience success in meaningful ways.

FYI providers can employ this approach by promoting supportive services as a roadmap to independence. Though supportive services are voluntary, they present an opportunity for providers to collaborate with participants to customize a plan of independence that includes matching their unique skill sets, goals, and interests with supportive services and personal development opportunities within the program that suit their unique path. This approach requires a genuine effort to understand the needs of program participants.

FYI providers should explore each participant's skills and goals to provide them with opportunities to develop those skills in the program. Depending on their skills and goals, youth can lead group activities, serve on an advisory board, present materials in meetings, or mentor onboarding program participants. Promoting and allowing these types of youth participation can cultivate self-sufficiency and development. An important aspect of positive youth development is viewing youth as equal partners in shaping their

⁴ [Housing and Education Cross-Systems Collaboration - HUD Exchange](#)

To facilitate meaningful and authentic youth outreach approaches, it is necessary to practice internal and external communication skillfully. Successful program outcomes depend on understanding the needs of youth today, leveraging supportive services, and viewing the youth as collaborators of change. The strategies and suggestions in this guide can be housed under two primary guiding principles: positive youth development and authentic youth engagement.

future. Young adults should have a significant voice in the decisions that affect their lives, and having their voice prioritized builds leadership skills, sharpens their ability to self-advocate, and prepares them for the professional world. By increasing a young person's stake and influence in their lives, they are better positioned to effect change in their community.

Actively engaging FYI youth allows participants to feel heard and respected. The FYI program and service providers can become familiar with the societal norms of youth and young adults to adapt to meet the needs of program participants. Youth culture is constantly changing and is heavily influenced by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is important to understand the subculture--as a whole--in addition to the unique developmental needs of the individual. These years are essential and a potential time for the youth's development of self-expression. Physical appearance, reputation amongst peers, vocabulary, social media, and romantic relationships may be prioritized as a value in the lives of youth partners. Rather than criticize these priorities, it is important to integrate them into their self-development. If physical appearance is important, how can they use that as a mode of self-expression while also dressing in alignment with future goals? If reputation is important, how can reputation be used to encourage stepping into leadership roles? If the youth are motivated by social media, how might this indicate a possible career path in media and content creation? Providers should work with youth as individuals with unique experiences, goals, and values. Over time, their identity, goals, and values will evolve, and being flexible can make the difference between engagement and disconnection.

Authentic Youth Engagement

Working with youth requires a genuine effort to understand their needs. Engaging youth requires flexibility, authenticity, and persistence. Partnering with youth is a valuable and important aspect of program development. Their skills, perspective, and life experiences offer insight into the present and future needs of the young adults eligible for FYI vouchers. Effective partnerships are authentic, intentional, and mutually beneficial. There are four components to authentic youth engagement: youth-adult partnerships, preparation, opportunity, and support.

- **Youth-Adult Partnerships**

Youth-adult partnerships honor differences in experience while also viewing young people as equal partners in the decisions that impact their lives. A beneficiary-provider relationship is often one-sided and can present an unequal power dynamic. At the same time, a partnership cultivates trust through exchanging information, honest communication, and mutual respect for differences in lived experiences. In youth-adult partnerships, it is important to be proactive in setting expectations about roles and decision-making. This practice builds self-esteem while also developing problem-solving and leadership skills.

- **Preparation**

Providing youth with information, ensuring they understand it, and giving them time to consider what it means prepares them to make informed decisions about their future. Preparation requires time, effort, flexibility, and patience from everyone involved, including the program participant. Understanding the developmental needs of each program participant is an essential part of preparing to help them address housing needs and supportive services. Understanding the developmental needs of each participant also allows the program and supportive staff to be proactive about establishing coping mechanisms for the challenges that come with adulthood,

such as job and rental application denials, inequity in the workplace, and dealing with the aftermath of poor budgeting decisions.

- **Opportunity**

Securing and creating opportunities for youth partners can happen even with limited resources. Inviting youth into a partnership can be as simple as asking them what they think or feel about something, inviting them to meetings, and leveraging their expertise in decision-making processes. Involving youth partners in programmatic planning cultivates opportunities for them to acquire skills to become self-sufficient adults.

- **Support**

Advocacy takes on many different forms. It all depends on the unique needs of each individual. Authentic engagement requires the abandonment of a one-size-fits-all approach and the acceptance that each person has different needs. Support may look like physically showing up to help map bus routes or rehearse for a job interview, while others may need emotional support or a listening ear. Support can also look like knowing the support a participant needs is out of your scope, finding adequate support for their needs, and advocating on their behalf to receive that support. Support can come from the community, supportive services, friends of the participant, and even mindfulness practices. The goal is reassurance that the youth are not alone in this developmental phase of their lives.

Research Findings on the Challenge and Barriers to Authentic Youth Engagement

[The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®](#) is an effort of the Annie E. Casey Foundation that works to ensure that young people ages 14 to 26 who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday have the resources, relationships, and opportunities to achieve well-being and success.

The purpose was to synthesize and share the Jim Casey Initiative's approach to youth engagement across four Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative sites: Georgia, Hawai'i, New Mexico, and Tennessee. The study consisted of 46 youth surveys and 15 youth interviews, and 35 staff/community partner surveys with 15 staff/community partner interviews.

According to the study, the themes of significant barriers to youth engagement expressed by the youth interviews were resource and staff limitations, maintaining youth engagement, and issues related to equity and diversity. The themes of significant barriers to youth engagement expressed by the staff were resource and staff limitations and maintaining youth engagement. Note that the staff did not see equity and diversity as barriers, which points to the importance of viewing youth participants as partners whose experiences can help shape program outcomes. The study also reported a lack of social-emotional resources, time, transportation, staff burnout, and turnover as barriers to youth engagement. The Hawai'i site reported trouble getting youth to participate in a two-day training, despite offering compensation. The study found that youth not having their basic needs met impacted their ability to participate fully and consistently in program activity. Other themes included ineffective communication strategies from staff and culturally insensitive engagement from staff.

This guide does not speak to the impact of the Jim Casey initiative. Rather, it leverages the analysis of challenges and barriers to youth engagement and offers an example of the types of challenges that can arise when implementing youth engagement strategies. It can help communities reflect on historical and current challenges and create informed FYI engagement approaches.

As stated, positive youth development and authentic youth engagement can serve as guideposts for communities interested in developing population-specific FYI-youth engagement strategies. The suggestions below can be expanded or altered to meet the needs of each individual community.

Youth Engagement Strategies

These strategies consist of various efforts ranging from simple to complex. Each step in developing a youth-adult partnership requires a different set of strategies. The strategies needed to establish the connection are not necessarily the ones needed to maintain it. Below are creative and practical strategies that can help foster trust with FYI youth partners using the resources available.

Establishing A Connection

- Identify FYI-eligible youth by learning more about other providers already serving youth and young adults. These resources can help you learn more about the cultural and location-specific needs and unique challenges of FYI-eligible youth in your area.
- Conduct a basic needs analysis based on your learnings from talking with other providers.
- Establish a liaison and set up a general info meeting time to cover topics based on the information gathered from providers. The meeting time can be changed afterward. The intention is to demonstrate a commitment to youth partners by proactively setting aside time and space to speak with them.
 - Get creative! Meetings do not have to occur on a screen or in an office. Organize an FYI community kickball event, picnic, or game night with an established time to discuss the program, preferably in an area where youth are frequent.
 - Interactivity develops multiple skills at once and is an effective way to build trust and learn more about potential youth partners. Partner with youth providers, local libraries, or community centers for venue sites.
- Keep pamphlets or printed material with program information when conducting outreach.
- Invite youth to the general info meeting/event. Encourage them to bring a friend if they know anyone who could benefit from the services.
- Be genuinely interested in what they have to share, what they think, and how they see themselves involved. Even if you are participating in activities, take mental notes of their expressed goals and motivations and share the benefits of FYI.
- Provide clear next steps that move the needle toward program participation and establish regular communication.

Maintaining the Connection

- Be clear about the FYI process and limitations with program participants.
- Commit to regular meeting times to check in and receive feedback.
- Regularly ask for feedback and demonstrate the integration of feedback.
- Invite program participants to decision-making meetings with leadership. Encourage participation by asking questions.

- Develop or support the development of a youth advisory board and peer support network.
 - This is especially helpful in keeping youth involved even after the 36-month period (or FSHO extension). A compensation policy should be developed and implemented.
- Invite former program participants to join the lived experience committee and other adult advisory boards, if applicable.
- Make every moment with youth an opportunity for learning and development.
- Provide staff training on trauma-informed practices, cultural sensitivity, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion.
- Provide staff and youth partners training on non-violent conflict resolution.

FYI aims to empower youth who have exited or plan to exit foster care by providing a sense of stability while cultivating self-sufficiency. It is also an opportunity for youth to contribute knowledge, lived expertise, and skillsets to developing policy, program, and systems transformation. Engaging youth authentically is a worthwhile investment, and it requires program and service providers to always be on the edge of social innovation.

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): Practices for Engaging Youth Participants Topic Guide (forthcoming)
- HUD FYI Initiative Webinar Series: Youth Engagement
<https://www.hudexchange.info/trainings/courses/fyi-initiative-webinar-series-youth-engagement/>
- Authentic Youth Engagement Guide
<https://www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/areas-of-expertise/authentic-youth-engagement>
- Full Case Study: Authentic Youth Engagement in Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Sites
<https://www.aecf.org/resources/in-depth-case-studies-of-authentic-youth-engagement-in-jim-casey-youth-oppo>
- Overview of Notice PIH 2023-04 & The FYI Form Submission Process (PowerPoint Slides)
https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/Overview_PIH2023-04_03142023.pdf
- FYI HUD Exchange Landing Page:
https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/fyi
- Family Unification Program: Strategies for Engaging Participants Topic Guide (forthcoming)
- Child Welfare Housing Services
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/service-array/housing/>

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