The Time to Grow:
Meeting the Needs of Connecticut Youth Aging Out of Foster Care
Nicole Updegrove and Lauren Ruth, Ph.D.

December 2016

“[Providing for foster youth] requires that supports be tied to needs and abilities, rather than offered as rewards for those perceived to be doing best. As in any family, budgetary considerations will inevitably have some effect on the supports afforded, but, as in any family, the commitment to support should not end because the dollars are short.”

– Emily Buss et al, From Foster Care to Adulthood: University of Chicago Law School Foster Care Project’s Protocol for Reform (2008)
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements p. 2
Introduction p. 3
Chapter 1. Youth aging out in Connecticut p. 4
   A. Profile of foster youth aging out in Connecticut p. 4
   B. Connecticut’s economic environment for young adults p. 10
Chapter 2. Research p. 11
   A. Emerging adulthood p. 11
   B. Barriers to success for older foster youth p. 12
Chapter 3. Policy p. 14
   A. Policy addressing emerging adulthood p. 14
   B. Federal legislation addressing barriers to success for foster youth p. 15
   C. Connecticut policy regarding older foster youth; p. 16
      i. Policy impacting adolescents in care p. 16
      ii. Policy impacting post-majority youth p. 17
Chapter 4. Research implications for older youth policies p. 19
   A. Remaining in care p. 19
   B. Preparation for self-sufficiency p. 20
   C. Homelessness after discharge p. 20
   D. Legal and relational permanency p. 21
   E. Housing before discharge p. 21
   F. Cost savings and return on investment p. 22
Chapter 5. Policy recommendations to improve outcomes for youth aging out of care p. 23
   Aspirational Vision for Connecticut p. 25
Chapter 6. Conclusions p. 28
Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Melville Charitable Trust, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which have made publication of this report possible.

We would also like to thank Justin Abbasi for his assistance with research and review. We appreciate our partners at the Department of Children and Families Office for Research and Evaluation, especially Janet Gonzalez, for providing current Connecticut data. We must also acknowledge the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at Cornell University for providing longitudinal data. Last but not least, we appreciate the time and wisdom provided by those who reviewed this report: Kally Moquett, Katie Durand, Stacey Violante Cote, Josh Howroyd, Linda Dixon, Elizabeth Duryea, Dan Ross, Lisa Driscoll, and Josh Fisher.
The Time to Grow:  
Meeting the Needs of Connecticut Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

All children deserve ample opportunities to reach their full social, emotional, and intellectual potentials and become productive members of their communities. Connecticut’s child welfare system, administered by the Department of Children and Families (DCF), exists to ensure the safety and well-being of the most vulnerable children. Policymakers and state agencies in Connecticut should strive to ensure that children in state care reach their full potentials and have sufficient supports to become contributing adults upon leaving care.

Children do best when they live in stable, supportive families. DCF has made great improvements in keeping families intact and in placing children with relatives, but in many cases DCF is unable to achieve reunification, adoption, or a transfer of guardianship. When this happens, children ultimately “age out” of state care as legal adults without the guidance or financial supports that families provide. Youth who age out of care are likely to attain less education, face higher rates of unemployment and lower wages, encounter more housing insecurity, and experience pregnancy earlier than youth who grow up in the care of a family.\(^1\)

In Connecticut, youth can choose to delay leaving DCF care to pursue educational opportunities under the condition that they comply with numerous requirements. DCF offers youth who stay in care multiple pathways toward success, however, many struggle to meet these expectations. Regardless of educational success, in the end, the 1,374 youth who aged out over the last five years’ all faced a daunting challenge: transitioning from state care into adulthood without a supportive family. The total cessation of state support leaves these vulnerable youth without necessary resources and without a safety net.

Although DCF has managed to provide many quality services under limited appropriations, poor outcomes for so many youth highlight the need for continual refinement. Youth exiting state care, regardless of whether they pursue further education, need additional supports so that they can develop into self-sufficient and contributing members of their communities. To improve personal outcomes and avoid costly reactive interventions, Connecticut should ultimately work toward the long-term goal of extending care to age 21 for all youth. Because that goal may be unattainable in the short-term, we offer five low-cost strategies through which DCF can expand and strengthen supports for these youth. Our evidence-based recommendations reflect areas of need in Connecticut and national best practices. These recommendations are:

- Assist youth in better preparing for the future. This includes innovation in case planning, ongoing education about post-secondary policies, comprehensive discharge planning, and developing contingency plans.
- Enhance supports for older youth seeking connections with their biological and foster families.
- Provide a guaranteed 90-day transition period for all youth leaving care.
- Prevent youth from discharging into homelessness and intervene in the event of homelessness.
- Expand data collection regarding youth outcomes after leaving care.

Aging Out: Turning 18  
(Connecticut’s legal age of majority) while in foster care, and therefore transitioning from the custodial care of the state to adulthood without the legal permanence of a family.
Chapter 1 begins by outlining some of the outcomes of Connecticut foster youth who have recently aged out of care. This includes discussion of the economic environment they face due to their low levels of educational attainment. Chapter 2 presents research regarding the vulnerability of “emerging adulthood” and the particular barriers to success for foster youth. Chapter 3 discusses policies reflecting this research: first, state and national policies reflecting an emerging adulthood and second, federal legislation and Connecticut policy concerning older foster youth. Chapter 4 presents research implications for child welfare policy impacting older youth. Finally, Chapter 5 presents our recommendations.

Chapter 1. Youth Aging Out in Connecticut

Discharging / exiting from care:
Leaving the care of the Department of Children and Families.

Youth who age out of care discharge from DCF at or after 18. At age 18, youth must choose whether to leave care immediately or to comply with Department expectations in order to receive DCF services voluntarily up to age 21 (and sometimes 23). Youth exit care in the following ways:

- Voluntarily, at or after age 18;
- After fulfilling their educational goal;
- Involuntarily, due to noncompliance with DCF expectations.

Upon exiting from care, all DCF services for youth over 18 (including all educational funding, housing, and case management) typically cease entirely.

Some youth with serious developmental or mental health impairment transition into other state agencies at 18 or 21.

In this section we discuss available data regarding Connecticut foster youth over 18. First, we discuss their conditions upon leaving care, with particular emphasis upon housing needs and educational attainment. Second, we discuss Connecticut’s high cost of living and challenging workforce environment for young adults. Foster youths’ low educational attainment, low earnings, high unemployment, and unstable housing indicate that many young adults are ill-equipped for self-sufficiency when they leave care.

A. Profile: Foster Youth Aging Out in Connecticut

Foster youth come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse experiences. Compared with other children in Connecticut, foster youth are disproportionately children of color. Among 469 interviewed Connecticut children who were 17 years old and in foster care in 2011, 29% were black, 24% were white and Hispanic, 45% were non-Hispanic white, and 1% identified as a different race/ethnicity. In comparison, overall state demographics that year were 11% non-Hispanic black, 20% Hispanic (of any race), 60% non-Hispanic white(?), and 9% other races/ethnicities.

Some of these youth entered care as infants; others entered as late as 17. A lucky few spent their lives with just one supportive foster family; others bounced around through twenty or more placements. While some received sufficient services and education in care, others manifested complex needs the system was unable to meet. The aging out process is similarly diverse. Some youth take advantage of opportunities for continued care, higher education, and

---

1 This data comes from the 2011 cohort of youth aging out of care tracked by the National Youth in Transition Database.
support through age 21 (and sometimes 23). Some youth willingly “sign themselves out” of care on their 18th birthdays and at this point must tackle young adulthood without DCF supports. In the end, they all reach adulthood, often without the emotional or social resources needed to be resilient and successful.

**Fewer than half of foster youth remain in care past 18 to pursue educational opportunities.** Youth may choose to leave care immediately at 18 or remain in care voluntarily to pursue educational and/or employment training opportunities. In Fiscal Year 2016 (FY 16), 471 youth were in state care three months after turning 18. Of those youth, just 37% elected to remain in care to pursue education or training.

**Foster youth are disproportionately undereducated.** Current policy allows youth to remain in care past 18 while they complete high school. However, similar to former foster youth in other states (though better than some), in FY 16 only 79% of those who aged out had a high school diploma or equivalent when they left care. In contrast, almost 90% of Connecticut adults 25 and older have at least a high school diploma.

After completing high school, 15% of foster youth achieved a vocational certificate or licensure (e.g., cosmetology, welding, etc.) while in care. Rates of college completion, however, were much lower; by the time foster youth left care, just seven (3%) had earned an associate’s degree, and twenty four (9%) had earned a bachelor’s degree. By comparison, almost 38% of all Connecticut adults 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree or higher.

**Figure 1. Employment of Connecticut Youth**

![Employment of Connecticut Youth, FY 15](image)

- **Foster youth at discharge, 18 - 23**
- **Connecticut youth not in school, 18 - 24**

Most foster youth age out without a job to support themselves. Only 42% of youth aging out in FY 16 had a job when they left care. More than half of those who were working were doing so only part-time. Compared with Connecticut youth 18 – 24 who are not in school, foster youth at the time of discharge (18 – 23) were about 70% less likely to be employed.

---

**Policy Overview:**

Connecticut offers extended services to youth over 18 who are in one of the following federally reimbursable categories:

1. Completing high school or equivalent degree.
2. Enrolled in post-secondary or vocational education.
3. “Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment.”

Connecticut does not offer extended services to youth in the remaining federally reimbursable categories:

1. Working at least 80 hours per month.
2. Too impaired to accomplish any of the above.

---

While not a perfect comparison group, Connecticut youth who are not in school are roughly comparable to all foster youth aging out because foster youth who have discharged from care are almost guaranteed to have either completed school, left school without finishing, or not entered school.
Youth are parenting early. Over 13% of all discharging youth in FY 16 were either pregnant or parenting at least one child. Note that Connecticut foster youth experience early pregnancy and parenting at much lower rates than foster youth in some other states.\textsuperscript{10} However, pregnancies among foster youth remain concerning because they decrease the likelihood that the youth will continue their education, and the children of foster youth face increased risk of being placed in foster care themselves.\textsuperscript{11}

As seen in Figure 2, at the time they age out, almost half of foster youth live in settings from which they will likely have to leave. Housing instability at the time of discharge may contribute to the likelihood of homelessness.

- Non-relative foster homes often cease to be resources for youth after they leave care, perhaps in part because foster care stipends end. Indeed, although 26% of youth aging out were living in foster homes at the time of discharge, only 8% planned to live with a former foster family after leaving care.
- Group homes for youth with behavioral challenges, which are operated by DCF or contracted agencies, cannot house youth after they leave care.
- Residential treatment settings can be short-term options for acute or long-term psychiatric illness. Many of these settings for youth are operated by DCF rather than by community hospitals and are therefore unable to keep youth after they exit DCF care. Youth aging out of residential settings may discharge to community treatment centers or to Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) programs, or they may be on their own.
- Homeless shelters provide only short-term housing options. Youth who are already living in shelters while they have DCF support are likely to remain homeless (for at least a short time) without support. Moreover, shelter options for young adults are limited, leaving them further at risk of losing shelter.\textsuperscript{12}

Figure 2. Foster Youths’ Living Conditions before Discharge
Few youth aging out of care anticipate living alone, and some face unsafe or unstable living arrangements immediately upon leaving care. Figure 3, below, shows youths’ anticipated living arrangements after leaving DCF care. Only 18% planned to live on their own, either with or without a child. Over 20% planned to live with extended family or former foster families.

Almost 20% planned to live with a partner or friends, which for the most part consisted of living in friends’ homes rather than self-supporting with roommates.\textsuperscript{13} Dependent situations like this leave young adults at risk of abrupt loss of housing.

Almost 15\% of youth planned to go home to biological parents. DCF prioritizes reunifying children with their parents,\textsuperscript{14} so by nature, youth who age out have not been formally returned home as minors. This indicates that DCF found reunification unsafe, inappropriate, or not in the child’s best interest. Despite this, many young adults return to their parents after leaving DCF.

Another 7\% of youth at the time of discharge were already facing adverse housing options — incarceration or homelessness — or DCF did not know where they planned to go, including some who could not be found.

Figure 3. Foster Youth Anticipated Living Arrangements after Discharge
Almost all youth have case reviews soon before exiting care. Every six months, every child in care has an Administrative Case Review (ACR) to review and discuss their case plan. ACRs focus on reviewing the child’s strengths and needs, necessary services, and ongoing progress toward goals. That 99% of youth exiting care had a case plan review in the six months before discharge reflects significant efforts and drastic improvement by DCF under federal monitoring mandated by Juan F. v. Malloy.\(^iv\)

Figure 4. Youth Conditions upon Discharge: Employment, High School Education, and Pregnancy/Parenting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>High School Education</th>
<th>Pregnant and Parenting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only a quarter of youth have had timely discharge plan reviews before exiting care. Distinct from case planning, adolescent discharge plans specifically address youth’s needs prior to and upon exiting care. DCF policy mandates that social workers write a discharge plan when the youth turns sixteen and review it with youth during every ACR. During the 90-day period prior to discharge, social workers must hold an ACR to ensure that youth have concrete, up-to-date plans for income, housing, and other needs after leaving care.\(^iv\) However, according to data provided by DCF, only 21% of youth exiting care in FY 16 reviewed their discharge plan within six months of their discharge date.

Although our present data do not allow for longitudinal tracking of the youth after discharge, previous data reveal other adverse outcomes for former foster youth in Connecticut:

Current and former foster youth are disproportionately victims of sex-trafficking. In 2015, 133 youth were served by DCF Human Anti-trafficking Response Teams due to sex trafficking and exploitation. Of those youth, 20% were currently living in foster homes and 7% were living in congregate care.\(^v\) Sex trafficking victims, without the right supports and services, often are re-victimized as adults.\(^vi\) Since 2010, Connecticut has launched extensive, nationally recognized efforts to identify, prevent, and respond to child trafficking.

---

\(^iv\) Juan F. v. Malloy is a class action suit filed against the Governor of Connecticut and the Commissioner of DCF on behalf of current foster children and children at risk of maltreatment. As a result of this case, Connecticut is under federal court monitoring to ensure that DCF is making adequate improvements in identifying children at risk of maltreatment and protecting the children in its custody.
sexual exploitation, especially among foster youth, but youth who have grown up in foster care remain highly vulnerable to exploitation.

**Former foster youth often depend on state services or public assistance as adults.** 18% of youth aging out left DCF to live in settings operated by either the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) or DMHAS Young Adult Services programs, which provide intensive supports to some young adults with serious impairments. Notably, DDS and DMHAS are voluntary programs; some youth who qualify for their services choose independence over intensive services within another state agency.

In addition to youth requiring state agency supports, a 2015 follow-up interview with youth who had aged out revealed that 50% of those interviewed were relying on public assistance for food, housing, or cash welfare payments at age 21.

**Former foster youth face disproportionate rates of homelessness and more adverse outcomes when homeless.** Nationally, former foster youth face high rates of homelessness. In Connecticut, follow-up at age 21 with youth who had aged out found that almost 30% of those interviewed experienced homelessness between age 19 and 21. Having grown up in care is also associated with worse outcomes for homeless youth. In 2015, formerly-child-welfare-involved homeless youth in Connecticut were three times more likely to have moved two or more times in the previous six months and six times more likely to have been involved with the criminal justice system than other homeless youth.

**Former foster youth face disproportionate rates of incarceration.** Follow-up with youth who had aged out identified that at least 26% of youth who could be located were incarcerated at some point between age 19 and 21. The real incidence of incarceration may be higher, as DCF was unable to find half of the youth for interview.

**Poor outcomes for foster youth often persist into adulthood.** The Midwest

---

**Figure 5. Homelessness and Public Assistance after Leaving Care**

**Conditions of Former Foster Youth (No Longer in Care) at Age 21, 2015**

**Figure 6. Incarceration after Leaving Care**

**Conditions of Former Foster Youth (No Longer in Care) at Age 21, 2015**

---

Connecticut Voices for Children
Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (“the Midwest Study”), a multistate longitudinal study of former foster youth, reveals other adverse outcomes for former foster youth several years out of care. At age 24, two-thirds reported feeling lucky to have been placed in foster care, however, many of their outcomes were poor:

- One-third still did not feel “very prepared” for self-sufficiency.
- More than three-quarters of young women had been pregnant (almost twice the national rate).\(^\text{26}\)
- Less than half were employed (two-thirds the estimated national employment rate of this age group).\(^\text{26}\)

### B. Connecticut’s Economic Environment for Young Adults

Follow-up at age 21 with Connecticut youth who had aged out found that just 16% were working full-time. Almost half were not working at all.\(^\text{27}\) This data did not include any information concerning wages. Our primary information concerning wages comes from the Midwest Study; at age 26, the median hourly wage for former foster youth in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois was just $10, and more than half of those employed qualified for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).\(^\text{28}\) Given that Connecticut has a different economic environment than Midwestern states, we examine Census employment and wage data for Connecticut youth with similar age and educational profiles to those aging out of care.

Less educated foster youth face a job market with high unemployment and low wages. Opportunities for employment in Connecticut vary greatly according to educational attainment. In 2015, compared with young associate’s degree holders, youth 18 to 24 with only a high school diploma (who were not in school) were more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be out of the labor force, and on average earned 33% less per year ($12,800 vs. $19,200). Four-year degrees widen disparities further: compared with young adults with a bachelor’s degree, high school graduates were three times as likely to be unemployed and earned less than half as much income.\(^\text{29}\)

Wage and employment disparities present especially pressing issues for foster youth, since they achieve bachelor’s degrees at just a quarter the rate of the state average. The 21% of Connecticut foster youth aging out without even a high school diploma face even greater difficulty finding employment and earning enough to support themselves. In 2015, more than 20% of state residents without a high school diploma were unemployed, and those who were working earned an average of just $7,300 per year.\(^\text{30}\) Given that youth aging out of foster care are disproportionately black and Hispanic, they can expect to earn even less.\(^\text{31}\)

---

**Figure 7. Employment of Connecticut Young Adults Who Are Not in School, 2015\(^\text{32}\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>In the Labor Force</th>
<th>Out of Labor Force</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Mean Annual Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No H.S. Diploma</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>$7,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Diploma or GED</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>$12,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>$19,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree or More</td>
<td>95.1%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>$26,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on data from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health.
Connecticut’s high cost of living makes self-sufficiency unattainable for many young people. According to the United Way’s ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Report, as of 2014 the “bare-minimum Household Survival Budget” for a single adult required annual income of $22,656. As of 2014, 77% of households headed by residents under 25 fell below this threshold, compared with 38% of households headed by 25- to 44-year-olds, possibly because young workers start out with lower earnings and fewer assets.

Only young adults with a bachelor’s degree can expect to earn enough to be self-sufficient in Connecticut. Even young associate’s degree holders do not, on average, meet the minimum Household Survival Budget. For the 64% of former foster youth who do not plan to live with family after leaving care—and especially those with children to support—costs will be unmanageable. Further, foster youth typically do not have the same familial safety net that many other young adults can rely on to attain education, achieve employment, and accumulate assets, rendering later advancement even more difficult.

Former foster youth have to support themselves in a state where few young people live alone. As of the 2015 Census, 42% of Connecticut young adults 18 – 34 were living with their parents or as part of a parent’s household, and another 11% lived with other family members. A higher percentage of millennials in Connecticut live with their parents than any other state except New Jersey. For many former foster children, however, living at home is not an option. Notably, in FY 16, 18% of youth exiting care planned to live alone or with their child, while as of the 2015 Census only 7% of Connecticut young adults 18 – 34 do so.

In summary, almost 300 young people in Connecticut aged out of foster care last year. They were disproportionately low-educated, parenting early, and unemployed with few familial supports. Given Connecticut’s harsh economic environment for young, low-educated workers, without further preparation, foster youth who have aged out are likely to have great difficulty supporting themselves.

Chapter 2. Research

In this section we review research reflecting the vulnerability of older foster youth. First, we discuss the concept of “emerging adulthood” – a phase of development between adolescence and adulthood, involving instability, exploration, and risk-taking. In this stage, young adults continue to need the guidance and material supports that are commonly provided by parents. Second, we discuss the particular vulnerabilities of youth who have grown up in foster care. Foster youth face challenges not only due to their young age, but also because of preexisting conditions, the inherent instability of foster care, and specific child welfare policies (especially regarding post-secondary education and aging out of care). Together, this research demonstrates that significant quantifiable disadvantages present formidable challenges to foster youths’ ability to succeed in early adulthood. In the following chapter, we discuss policies that begin to address these disadvantages.

A. Emerging Adulthood

Young adults in America often do not achieve self-sufficiency until age 26, and receive an average of $44,500 in financial supports from parents after turning 18. Although youth at 18 are legally adults, they do not think or behave as older adults do. Research shows that the brain is still developing through the mid-twenties, causing heightened risk-taking and delays in self-regulation.
Adolescence and young adulthood form a developmental period distinct from both childhood and adulthood. Adolescence (10-18) through young adulthood (19-24) is a developmental period marked by multiple and rapid changes in brain structures and the endocrine system. These biological changes are associated with young people’s developing self-directed and self-regulating thoughts and behaviors. The cognitive and endocrine systems mature at different rates, however, making adolescence and early adulthood a period of great turbulence and vulnerability.

Adolescent development is a gradual process involving experimentation and risk-taking. The development of adult-like executive functioning (long-term planning, self-regulation, weighing risks and rewards, and emotional regulation) can only happen after the cognitive skills of abstract and hypothetical thinking reach advanced stages, usually in mid-adolescence. Many youth begin puberty before they have developed these skills, leading to changes in social motivations, emotional intensity, and reactivity. Because of these changes, puberty is also associated with increased sensation-seeking, risk-taking, and reckless behavior meant to gain social standing or appear romantically attractive to peers. Further, there is evidence that in the presence of other youth, adolescents often make poor decisions despite understanding the risks involved. Even after youth have developed adult-like cognitive capacities, their ability to place that cognition into a social context is slow to mature, continuing through the mid-twenties.

Adolescent development experts suggest that systems and policies that serve youth should account for the inevitability that all youth will—at one point or another—make big mistakes and that systems and policies must protect youth when these mistakes happen.

B. Barriers to Success for Foster Youth

Youth who grew up in state care, burdened by traumas from both in and outside of the system, are ill-prepared to independently face adulthood at 18.

When individual young people fail to meet adults’ expectations, adverse outcomes are often attributed to the young peoples’ poor choices. For youth in care over 18, “failure to comply” with DCF expectations and policies often leads to termination of services (23% of all Connecticut DCF discharges in 2016). However, research shows that not only are these young adults experiencing a developmentally appropriate period of experimentation and risk-taking, but also they face substantial additional barriers to success because of their childhoods. Some of the barriers are inevitable, but others are reinforced by policies that can be modified to contribute to better outcomes. When a quarter of all youth cannot meet Department expectations, policies and structures of support must be re-examined to understand why so many youth who desire to succeed are failing.

Children who experience neglect and abuse suffer long-term effects. Some of the vulnerability of the foster care population stems from the preexisting family and community factors that led to DCF involvement. Connecticut foster care children were typically removed from their homes due to neglect rather than abuse, yet both neglect and abuse cause lasting trauma that can manifest in different emotional, physical, mental, and behavioral health challenges. Also, children removed from their families by child welfare agencies disproportionately come from poor families and communities. Early childhood poverty is associated with many adverse factors for development, including poor prenatal care and childhood nutrition, lower quality schools, unsafe housing, and negative peer and adult influences. All of these factors likely contribute to foster
youths’ disproportionate rates of developmental delays, chronic medical problems, and mental and behavioral health problems. These long-lasting deficits can leave abused and neglected children far behind their peers.

Among the challenges abused and neglected children face are attachment disorders. When caregiving does not meet infants’ and young children’s needs, children do not develop normal trust and bonds with adult caretakers. The resulting attachment disorders damage the ability to form healthy relationships and often create behavioral reactivity problems that last through adulthood.

Growing up in foster care jeopardizes opportunities to build lasting relationships in childhood and adolescence. In addition to lifelong challenges attributable to preexisting family and community factors, many foster youth also experience lifelong challenges due to experiences they had in care. In particular, attachment disorders are often exacerbated by foster care, which can subject youth to further inconsistency of adult caregivers and mentors. Many youth experience numerous placement disruptions in Connecticut in 2014, 37% of youth had experienced two or more placements (slightly higher than the national average). Others spend long periods in group care settings, where turnover is high and interactions are professional rather than familial. Even when changes in adult resources bring benefits – such as the transition to an adolescent specialist social worker at age 14 or removal from a deteriorating foster placement – changes can contribute to lifelong attachment problems for youth. Moreover, as a result of the transience of adult presence, many foster youth leave care with few adults to turn to for financial support, career advice, or help with new experiences like purchasing a car or first-time parenting.

Some child welfare policies restrict foster youths’ long-term achievement. Other barriers to success for foster youth are caused by specific child welfare policies, which can be addressed more directly than preexisting damage caused earlier in life. For example, after the age of majority, opportunities and support are often restricted to those high-achieving youth who “earn” them, such as those able to pursue higher education or job training. This leaves behind youth who do not appear college-bound. Once in college, the state’s standards are often higher than what most young adults can achieve. For example, youth enrolled in four-year degree programs must remain on track to graduate within four or five years, but only 55% of American college students at large finish within that timeframe. Moreover, many foster youth attend community colleges or vocational education programs, which have fewer supports and low graduation rates.

The total cessation of agency support leaves youth vulnerable. Even for youth who are successful and take advantage of all available opportunities in state care, the transition to adulthood can be abrupt and often lacking in supports. Connecticut’s child welfare system works to meet all the needs of children and youth in care, ranging from identification of health care providers to transportation to school to intervention in the case of school discipline. However, especially when youth are uncooperative, the risk is that tasks are done for, rather than with, youth in care. This occurs in part because accountability systems, like the ongoing federal
court monitoring of Connecticut DCF under *Juan F. v. Malloy*, often track outcomes (e.g., annual health visits or reduction in congregate care settings) rather than youth autonomy (e.g., youth learning to schedule their own appointments or youth’s preferences regarding placements). For the Department of Children and Families, as for many parents, solving a struggling child’s problem can be easier than working through the problem together.

The difference for foster children, of course, is that youth face an abrupt cliff once they become legal adults. The powerful state system that has served as a scaffolding of support (often for many years) now remains only through a short-term contract that can be terminated upon noncompliance. Although youth participation, normalcy, and self-advocacy are emphasized in case planning and other areas, legal adulthood brings significant change. Whereas at 17, failure in school would trigger a barrage of supports and services, at 18 for some youth it could trigger discharge from DCF within just 10 days. At that point, for many youth, there are few places to turn.

**Chapter 3. Policy**

In this chapter we discuss policies affecting older youth. First, we discuss national and state policies that reflect an emerging adulthood rather than an immediate transformation at 18. These policies gradually grant rights and responsibilities throughout adolescence into the mid-twenties. Second, we describe federal legislation that expands states’ abilities to support older foster youth. Third, we summarize current Connecticut Department of Children and Families policy and practice impacting adolescents and older youth in care.

**A. Policies Addressing Emerging Adulthood**

The rights and responsibilities of adulthood reflect an emerging adulthood rather than an immediate threshold. Often in response to research-driven advocacy, the legal markers of adulthood have risen and fallen throughout the twentieth century. Over the past decade, as research has pointed to a “lengthened age of childhood” and “emerging adulthood,” more advocates and lawmakers have focused on the unique needs of young adults, distinct from those of older adults. In 2014, the Affordable Care Act extended Medicaid coverage to foster youth and health insurance coverage under parents’ plans to other young adults until the age of 26. Similarly, ongoing national conversations revolve around preventing access to illegal substances, raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction for crime, and other ways to protect youth. These policies represent an acknowledgement that young adulthood is a time of growth as well as vulnerability. The result is that rights and opportunities for young people come gradually and in stages as they age and mature.

| Figure 6. State and Federal Statutes Regarding Adulthood |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| Age at which children’s consent must be achieved in order to adopt them | 12     |
| Connecticut age of sexual consent | 16     |
| Connecticut driver’s permit       | 16     |
| Connecticut minimum legal age of marriage (with parental consent) | 16     |
| Connecticut age of majority       | 18     |
| Federal right to vote             | 18     |
| Age of registry for Selective Service (men) | 18     |
| Age of end of special education Individual Education Plans (IEPs) | 21     |
| Federal drinking age              | 21     |
| Maximum age to be claimed as parents’ dependent on taxes | 24     |
| Maximum age of coverage under parents’ health insurance AND coverage under Medicaid for former foster youth | 26     |
B. Federal Legislation Addressing Barriers to Success for Older Foster Youth

Prior to 1986, the federal government did not provide reimbursement, guidance or support to states in preparing foster youth for independence. The 1986 Title IV-E Independent Living Program (ILP) was the first federal law to extend some funding to states for this purpose. Three major pieces of federal legislation since then have expanded support for youth aging out of foster care, including funding extended care past age 18.

Foster Care Independence Act of 1999

“The Chafee Act” doubled preexisting federal funding for state independent living programs and allowed greater flexibility for their use. For the first time, states could extend these funds to youth over age 18, including for room and board. For the first time, independent living funds could also be used for education, vocational and employment training, life skills training, and fostering connections to adults. A later amendment of the Chafee Act instituted Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs), which partially cover the costs of youths’ post-secondary education.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

Prior to the Fostering Connections Act (FCA), federal funding for foster care and adoption stipends (rather than supportive programs for independence) was available only until youth turned 18. FCA gave states the option to extend Title IV-E reimbursable foster care, adoption, or guardianship assistance payments to age 19, 20, or 21 if the youth fell within one of the following categories:

1. Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential.
2. Enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education.
3. Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment.
4. Employed for at least 80 hours per month.
5. Incapable of doing any of the above because of a medical condition.

Connecticut has expanded care to categories 1, 2, and 3 to age 21, with occasional expansion to 23.

The FCA also included other mandates for states, including the development of a personalized transition plan during the 90 days prior to a youth aging out.

Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014

The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (SFA) included provisions regarding aging out. The SFA granted youth aged 14 and older the right to participate in case planning, eliminated the designation of “Another Permanent Planned Living Arrangement” (APPLA, a designation indicating that the state was no longer pursuing adoption, kinship care, or reunification) for youth younger than 16, increased oversight over APPLA designations, increased appropriations beginning in Fiscal Year 2020 for the Chafee program, and mandated the transfer of vital documents to youth aging out of care. The SFA also created federal mandates related to monitoring and data sharing for the purpose of preventing sex trafficking. Connecticut and its Department of Children and Families have led the nation in implementing this policy and strengthening provisions to protect children in foster care from becoming victims of sex trafficking.
C. Connecticut Policy Regarding Older Foster Youth

Connecticut continues to make substantive legislative and policy changes concerning foster care to reduce the barriers facing foster children. Many improvements have been made in the areas of normalcy and permanency, including reduction in the use of congregate care and increases in placement of children with kin. Some policies that specifically impact youth who will age out are included below. Despite substantial improvements, outcome data indicates that Connecticut still has room for growth in successfully transitioning youth out of care.

Policy Impacting Adolescents in Care

Adolescent specialists: At 14, most DCF-committed youth are transferred from their child social worker to an Adolescent Specialist. Adolescent Specialists focus on preparing youth for the transition to adulthood.

Permanency teams: In 2015, Connecticut implemented Child and Family Permanency Teaming (CF-PT) to regularly convene teams of significant adults in a child or youth’s life to discuss case decisions and to advance permanency. Permanency teams help to ensure that every child has committed adults outside the child welfare system to provide all levels of support, even if these adults cannot serve as placement resources.

Work-to-Learn. Work-to-Learn provides services including job training, assessment, and placement to ensure “that youth who will age out of the foster care have the skills and opportunities provided to them that will assist in a more successful transition to adulthood.” All DCF regions partner with a community-based provider that offers this program. Over 1,000 foster youth have completed Work-to-Learn over the past five years.

Life skills: In 2014, Connecticut implemented a comprehensive new life skills program, the Learning Inventory of Skills Training (LIST) for youth aged 14 and older. This tool, conducted twice annually for each youth, assesses proficiency in 21 domains ranging from pregnancy prevention to legal skills. Some youth attend classes that teach LIST skills through Community Based Life Skills (CBLS) programs while others work on skills with foster parents, social workers, or other providers.

Discharge planning. Beginning at age 16, DCF must complete a DCF-2092 Adolescent Transition Plan to help youth plan for housing, education, employment, and other needs post-majority. These plans should be youth-driven. This document is to be reviewed at each biannual Administrative Case Review (ACR) and 90 days prior to discharge.

Post-secondary education plans. By the July before a youth’s senior year, DCF workers submit a post-secondary education plan to an internal consultant for approval. The plan includes, among other things, the youth’s transcripts, SAT scores, and stated post-secondary goals. Approval of this plan determines the post-secondary programs for which a youth can receive DCF support.

DCF-779. Youth who are expected to turn 18 in care receive a DCF-779 Notice at Age of Majority and Agreement for Services Post-Majority form informing them of the option to continue receiving services at 18 “as long as they remain in good standing in accordance with the DCF Adolescent Services Policy (Chapter 42) including participation in full-time attendance at:
• a secondary (high) school
• a technical school
• a college
• a stated-accredited job training program OR
• a post-secondary employment and career development program

“AND consent to remain in care by participating in services as documented in [their] case plan.”
On this form, youth indicate the approved type of post-secondary program they intend to attend or else agree to leave DCF care after turning 18.74

**Policy Impacting Post-Majority Youth**

**Post-Secondary Education.** Post-Secondary Education (PSE) under DCF policy refers to a “program that leads to an academic college degree or certification in a vocation or employment training.” To be eligible for PSE, youth must:

• Sign the DCF-779 form to remain in care.
• Maintain compliance with all DCF expectations through a post-majority contract.
• Follow a DCF-approved post-secondary education plan.
• Attend PSE full-time or the CHEER program (described below) immediately after graduation.

**Details:**

• Deferment: Youth can defer enrollment for up to one year if they attend formally-recognized community service programs.
• Part-time attendance: Youth with demonstrated need for accommodations may request Commissioner approval to take classes part-time.
• Minimum requirements: Each semester, youth must complete twenty-four non-remedial credits each year with a GPA of at least 2.0. Part-time attendance can be requested on a semester-by-semester basis according to mental health needs or a pre-existing Individual Education Plans (IEP). Remedial courses are permitted during the summer and first semester only.
• Funding: Funding covers tuition, board, and other costs up to the cost of attendance in the Connecticut State University system. Youth may assume costs over that limit.
• Duration: If compliant with all requirements, youth are eligible for funding through age 21, sometimes extended to 23.
• Second PSE opportunities: Youth are eligible for two PSE opportunities. Youth who are unsuccessful in their first PSE, vocational, or employment opportunity may be given an opportunity to participate in a second educational program. According to DCF Policy 42-3, DCF Area Program Managers may approve for some youth who successfully complete their first PSE opportunity to pursue a second, additional program if it serves as a continuation of the first.75

**CHAP.** The Community Housing Assistance Program (CHAP) provides case management and financial assistance for rent and other costs of independent living to post-majority youth who are in care, maintain good post-secondary educational standing, and meet certain other requirements. Youth in CHAP must be in school, working part-time (after demonstrating academic stability), and saving at least 50% of their earnings.76
CHEER. Youth in Community Housing Employment Enrichment Program (CHEER) are not in college but are pursuing post-secondary employment training and career development. Youth in CHEER receive housing and services similar to CHAP and can design their own program (including internships, apprenticeships, or work) to work towards job preparation. It also includes similar work and saving requirements. CHEER is limited to 18 months. Youth begin to assume the costs of care beginning in the tenth month of the program.77

CHEER has been available for the last two years, and provides a promising framework within DCF’s budget constraints for offering continued support and guidance to foster youth who are more inclined toward vocational advancement rather than academics.

Transition period. Youth who successfully complete their educational opportunity can request a 90-day period of support while they transition into full independence.78

DCF-800. Youth who are not in compliance with DCF expectations receive the DCF-800 Notice of Proposed Denial, Suspension, Reduction, or Discontinuation of Department of Children and Families Benefits Form. Youth have a right to request an administrative hearing within 10 days to maintain their benefits or 60 days to request reinstatement after they have been terminated.79

Re-Entry. Youth under 21 who have left care may apply for re-entry. Policy indicates that “[t]he primary focus of re-entry shall be post-secondary education or training. Re-entry shall not be construed as a housing program.”80

To summarize current policy: DCF begins preparing youth for independence through life skills training around age 14 and begins planning for post-secondary education before a youth’s senior year of high school. Youth are able to remain in care past 18 if they are pursuing their high school education, post-secondary education, or some other program or plan to reduce barriers to employment. Independent living arrangements are available to some youth. Some young adults who are unable or unwilling to pursue educational or vocational training, however, may not find a way to remain in care.

Chapter 4. Research Implications for Older Youth Policy

In this section we review research outcomes for older foster youth with implications for child welfare policy and practice. Overall, findings from national and longitudinal studies indicate that former foster children are rarely as “independent” or successful in their early twenties as could be hoped. Often, older youth will return to live with family, rely on public assistance, or lose autonomy through incarceration or homelessness. However, some studies do highlight factors associated with better long-term outcomes for youth, including completing at least some college and earning higher wages. These findings can be used to shape policy to better prepare youth for self-sufficiency.

A. Remaining in Care

Youth primarily stay in care to pursue their education and for material support. They leave care to seek “freedom.” Unlike Connecticut, California extends care for youth in all five federally reimbursable categories under the Fostering Connections Act, including youth who go to work rather than college and youth who
cannot pursue educational opportunities due to medical conditions.\textsuperscript{81} Two-thirds of California youth reported wanting to stay in care after age 18, indicating as their primary motivations both education and receiving support for material goods and housing. Youth who wanted to leave care at 18 reported their primary motivations as wanting to be on their own, wanting more freedom, and not wanting to deal with social workers.\textsuperscript{82} Understanding the rationales behind youths’ decisions to remain in care or leave can inform messaging to youth around their options.

The option to remain in care past age 18 may reduce the likelihood of minors running away or emancipating early. In the first two years of extended foster care in California, youth were more likely to remain in care through at least their 18th birthdays. Most of the increase was correlated with a decrease in youth running away or emancipating themselves from agency care prior to 18. There was also a small reduction in the rate of exit to reunification with biological family, but no decline in adoption or legal guardianship.\textsuperscript{83} Ensuring that adolescents know about extended care may improve outcomes for minors.

\textbf{B. Preparation for Self-Sufficiency}

Former foster youth are unlikely to graduate from college even if care is extended. Studies of foster youth indicate that former foster youth, like other young people, have high educational aspirations; most foster youth want to attend college and, of those who attend, most expect to graduate.\textsuperscript{84} However, studies of former foster youth report college graduation rates ranging from just one to eleven percent, even in states with extended foster care and supports for college attendance.\textsuperscript{85} By contrast, 30\% of all American adults 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree or higher.\textsuperscript{86}

As part of the Midwest Study’s longitudinal examination of former foster youth, researchers compared Illinois, which extended care to 21, to Iowa and Wisconsin, which did not offer extended care. The study concluded that extended foster care did not seem to increase youths’ rates of degree attainment.\textsuperscript{87} Youth who had recently dropped out of a college program most often cited as their rationale needing to work full-time, being unable to afford tuition and fees, and childcare responsibilities.\textsuperscript{88}

Notably, Connecticut is more generous in its post-secondary education (and daycare) funding than Illinois, which may help youth persevere in college through to graduation. In Connecticut, youth who are still in care at 19 are more likely to be enrolled in school at 21, compared with youth who left care prior to 19. Remaining in care at 19 in Connecticut is also associated with a higher likelihood of attaining a vocational degree by age 21.\textsuperscript{89}

Extending care alone is not sufficient to help youth graduate college, but it is associated with greater employment and wages. Remaining in care past 18 was associated with greater likelihood of completing at least a year of college,\textsuperscript{90} which does have beneficial impacts on employment. By age 24, former foster youth who finished high school were twice as likely to be employed (compared with youth who had not finished high school), and former foster youth who attended some college (even without obtaining a degree) were three times as likely to be employed. Even accounting for differences in educational attainment, in Illinois, each additional year in care past 18 was associated with almost three percent higher annual wages later in adulthood.\textsuperscript{91} However, one study is not enough to conclude causation; more data on these effects is necessary.

\textbf{C. Homelessness After Discharge}
Extending care alone is not sufficient to prevent homelessness. Notably, remaining in care at 19 in Connecticut is associated with lower rates of homelessness at 21. However, this association may not persist over time: while extended foster care in the Midwest Study was associated with lower rates of homelessness at 19 and 21, 30 months after leaving care there was no significant difference in experience of homelessness between youth with the option of extended care and youth without. By age 26, 36% of youth in the Midwest Study had been homeless for at least one night.

Six factors in the Midwest Study were associated with greater risk of homelessness: being male, having been physically abused before entering care, engaging in delinquent behaviors, having symptoms of a mental health disorder, having run away from care at least once, and having experienced more placement changes. Though not statistically significant, feeling very close to a parent or grandparent decreased the risk of homelessness.

Notably, identifying strategies to reduce the risk of homelessness for young adults is a major state concern, especially given that homelessness among young adults is associated with heightened rates of mental illness, substance abuse, criminal activity, victimization, survival sex, sex trafficking, and lack of education. Connecticut state agencies and nonprofit partners are working towards eliminating youth homelessness by 2020. Efforts must continue to address upstream prevention, especially among vulnerable foster youth.

D. Legal and Relational Permanency

Former foster youth tend to keep close contact with or live with their biological families as adults. Despite being removed from their biological families and despite the state deeming the families not fit for reunification, the majority of former foster youth are in frequent contact with family, including biological parents. At age 25 or 26, 81 percent of former foster youth in the Midwest Study had contact at least once a week with a biological family member, including almost half with a parent. About four percent of these youth were actively living with a parent when interviewed (and 22 percent had at some point after leaving care) and another fourteen percent were living with other relatives. Very few former foster youth (two percent) were living with former foster parents. These findings highlight the need to support youth in building healthy relationships with their biological families.

Notably, despite frequent contact (and sometimes residence) with family and other supportive adults, almost two in five former foster youth said they did not have enough people helping them meet their goals.

E. Housing Before Discharge

Housing options before discharge are associated with different rates of employment later in young adulthood. Youth in the Midwest Study who had lived in non-relative foster homes before exiting care were the most likely to be employed at age 24. In comparison, youth who exited care while living in group care or residential treatment were 60% less likely to be employed and tended to earn lower wages. Relative foster homes were also associated with lower likelihood of employment than non-relative foster homes, which the study’s authors suggest may be because relatives had fewer job connections or were more willing to provide financial supports than other foster families. Youth who had last lived in independent living settings fared slightly better, though they were still less likely to be employed than youth who left non-relative foster homes.
However, unlike Connecticut’s CHAP and CHEER programs, independent living settings in the Midwest Study are often assigned “not because [youth] are prepared to live independently, but because they have few remaining placement options.” Midwestern independent living programs also seemed to assist with employment less than CHAP and CHEER.

### F. Cost Savings and Return on Investment

Preventing adverse outcomes for foster youth can bring long-term cost savings. Finally, several studies have examined the costs and benefits of providing more robust supports to foster youth to mitigate poor outcomes, including extending care to all youth 18 – 21. Referring to a “pay now or pay much more later” dynamic in the financing of social services, multiple studies have concluded that the benefits of further investing in youth aging out of foster care far outweigh the costs.101

The Chapin Hall research center at the University of Chicago estimated that youths’ earnings increased by more than two dollars for every dollar spent on foster care beyond age 18.102 A Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative (JCYOI) analysis estimated the lifelong cost of foster youths’ disproportionate academic failure, unplanned pregnancy, and criminality to be $300,000 per youth, or almost $8 billion nationally for each cohort year leaving care.103 Based on the number of youth discharged from DCF this year, we estimate the public costs of these disproportionate adverse outcomes for this cohort of foster youth aging out of care in Connecticut to be around $82 million. This estimate is conservative in that it does not take into account the averted costs of other interventions and assistance. Individuals experiencing homelessness, for example, utilize about $33,000 in state services per year.104

More research is needed to prove what works to help older foster youth succeed. Although the JCYOI study shows that reducing disproportionately poor outcomes for each cohort of foster youth would save the state tens of millions of dollars, as of yet, there is no single, clear solution. However, the research discussed in this section has some indications for practice to support older foster youth:

- **Pursuit of education and support for material goods and housing are motivations for youth to remain in care past 18.** Youth with the option for extended care may be less likely to run away or emancipate from agency care prior to 18.
- **Extended care alone may not increase college graduation rates, but it is associated with increased college attendance and increased earnings.**
- **Youths’ inability to afford school, needing to work full-time, and needing to care for children may be areas to target to increase college completion.**
- **Extended care alone is insufficient to prevent later homelessness.** Additional supports and interventions should be implemented and evaluated.
- **Former foster youth keep regular contact with and sometimes live with biological family more often than with former foster families.** They may need support in reestablishing relationships with family.
- **Research is needed to determine which housing options for older youth, if any, are associated with more positive outcomes after leaving care.**
Chapter 5. Recommendations to Meet the Needs of Youth Aging Out of State Care

In this section we discuss our recommendations for changes in policy and practice to better support youth aging out of state care. Our primary recommendations are low-cost options focused on providing better preparation for the future, slower transitions, more support for biological family connections, measures to prevent homelessness, and better data collection. These recommendations may be implemented in policy, regulation, or state statute as appropriate.

We also acknowledge an aspirational vision towards which Connecticut should work long-term. This vision is likely unattainable in Connecticut’s current fiscal climate, but this vision can be approached incrementally and should be reconsidered when the budget allows for greater innovation.

Assist youth in better preparing for the future. This includes innovation in case planning, ongoing education about post-secondary policies, comprehensive discharge planning, and developing contingency plans.

- Ensure that case planning for older youth places greater emphasis on education, employment, and independent living.
  
  - *Education*: Low educational attainment for foster youth indicates a need for greater supports as youth navigate high school and college. Ideally, throughout high school and post-secondary education, the education portion of Administrative Case Reviews (ACRs) should include more thorough discussion and thoughtful planning regarding academic grades and strengthening areas of academic struggle, progress towards graduation, and preparations towards post-secondary plans. This may highlight service needs, and increase high school and post-secondary completion rates.

  - *Employment*: Low employments rates at the time of discharge indicate a need for greater supports as youth prepare for the workforce. Beginning when a youth enters high school, the vocational portion of ACRs should include review of an ongoing record of the youth’s career aspirations, work experience, vocational skills, and letters of recommendation. This may encourage youth to attain work experience during adolescence and assist youth in developing a more impressive résumé. (The DCF Youth Advisory Boards have made a similar recommendation.)

  - *Independent living*: High rates of homelessness indicate a need for greater preparation for maintaining safe, secure housing. As most adults will eventually need to support themselves in an apartment or house, young adulthood should serve as a time of skill-building and experimentation in independent living. In addition to tracking attainment of life skills, ACRs should address plans to ensure that youth gradually gain *direct experience* with independent living while they are in care. While not every youth may be qualified for an apartment, youth should be transitioned towards the least restrictive, most independent settings possible before they leave care.

- Better educate youth thoroughly and in advance of their 18th birthdays about their rights and options as young adults. High rates of noncompliance with DCF expectations and anecdotal reports from youth who serve on Youth Advisory Boards (YABs) about not fully understanding
post-majority policies\textsuperscript{107} indicate a need for better and more systematic information dissemination to older youth. Although DCF policies are available online and many social workers communicate them, too few youth understand the expectations they must fulfill or the services available to them. Youth need thorough, accessible information delivered on an ongoing basis. Consider ways to make policies, expectations, and available services accessible in an age- and developmentally-appropriate way to youth beginning around age 14. This should include description of re-entry policies, which youth may not be aware of.\textsuperscript{108} One option may be to ask YABs to develop a clear, youth-accessible letter, website, or smartphone app detailing the highlights of adolescent and post-majority policies to be distributed annually. Emphasis should be placed on messaging to high-risk groups, including young men with a history of crime, pregnant and parenting youth, and youth who are not on track to graduate high school.

- **Develop a comprehensive discharge checklist, and ensure that all youth review their discharge plans within the last 90 days before leaving care.** Less than a quarter of exiting youth reviewed their discharge plans within 90 days before leaving care. Practice should be modified to ensure universal discharge plan review prior to exiting care. Moreover, as recommended in the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee report about aging out in 2014, DCF should utilize a more comprehensive discharge checklist (with timelines) to help youth prepare for all of their needs after leaving care.\textsuperscript{109} The current checklist is brief and insufficiently detailed.\textsuperscript{110} As PRI noted, the discharge plans used by New York’s and Nebraska offer two useful models. Discharge checklists should be utilized alongside preexisting tools to assess youths’ risk of homelessness, such as the TAY Triage Tool or Next Step Tool.

- **Make contingency planning a part of discharge planning.** High rates of homelessness, unemployment, and other adverse outcomes for former foster youth indicate a need to help youth develop contingency plans. While engaging in discharge planning, social workers should actively engage youth to actively identify potential supports, alternatives, and state and community resources in case their first-choice education, career, or housing plans fall apart.

**Enhance supports for older youth seeking connections with their biological and foster families.**

- **Enhance supports for older youth seeking connections with biological family.** The number of youth who intend to live with their biological families after discharge indicates the need to support older youth reconnecting with family. For youth to be aging out of care means that the state did not see fit to reunify them with their biological family or transfer guardianship to other kin. After youth are in care for 15 months without reunification, the state usually pursues termination of parental rights, after which state support for youth-parent connections is limited. Many older youth seek and re-establish relationships with their biological parents nonetheless, some essentially achieving reunification alone without the supports and safeguards the state provides for a younger child.
Aspirational Vision for Connecticut

Given the state’s budget crisis, Connecticut cannot currently afford to implement the most cutting-edge innovations in keeping with our long history as a leader in social services. Therefore, two recommendations with potentially greater short-term costs and long-term benefits are highlighted for future research and consideration.

1. **Extended foster care to age 21 for youth in care in all federally reimbursable categories, with unlimited re-entry and exit.**
   Under the Fostering Connections Act, there are five federally reimbursable categories for extended care. Connecticut expanded care to the three categories reflecting educational or vocational training pursuits, but not to the following:
   1. Youth working at least 80 hours per month.
   2. Youth too impaired to accomplish any of the above.

As a result, it may be the lowest-functioning youth who receive the fewest services after age 18. Particularly given the low earnings of Connecticut young adults with lower levels of education, *youth who are not attending college need support.* Extending support to youth in all five federally reimbursable categories may help retain more of the most vulnerable youth in care longer and decrease long-term adverse outcomes.

2. **Tuition waivers for former foster youth throughout young adulthood.**
   Under current policies, in order to receive post-secondary support, youth in foster care must maintain a 2.0 GPA and obtain 12 non-remedial credits per semester towards graduation. In other words, DCF policy mandates that youth be full-time students to stay on track to graduate within two or four years, respectively. Youth are supposed to finish a two-year degree by age 21, and a four-year degree by 23.

Expecting former foster youth to complete college on-time at a young age *when students nationwide do not* may be unrealistic. At public four-year institutions nationwide, just one-third of students finish on time. Even more strikingly, just one-fifth of students at public two-year institutions finish even in *three* years. Completion rates are especially low for black, Latino, Pacific Islander and Native American students.\(^1\) Moreover, as a result of late starts, part-time attendance, and slow completion, one-fifth of students in four-year colleges and almost half of students in public two-year colleges are over the age of 25.\(^2\)

Some states, including Florida and Maryland offer full or partial **tuition waivers to in-state public colleges for former foster youth before and after they leave care.** Especially given that many foster youth have special education needs, resident children, and other challenges, waived tuition before and after they have left care may yield higher rates of college attendance at a time when youth feel more prepared and higher rates of program completion. Further research would indicate the potential benefits for Connecticut.


Although “permanency teaming” was enacted in Connecticut in 2015 to help youth in care build permanency connections, many older youth in care did not benefit from the practice in adolescence. Moreover, youth may not be able to involve their parents after their parents’ rights have been terminated. DCF support is necessary to help youth form healthy relationships with their families to increase permanency connections and mitigate safety risks. Permanency teaming should be prioritized for youth who will age out of care, and youth should be encouraged to consider whether they would like to involve their parents, even if their rights have been terminated. The Department should also consider offering other services to support older youths’ relationships with biological family, even if they will not be formally reunified.

- **Educate foster families about serving as lifelong supports for foster youth.** Homelessness and other adverse outcomes for former foster youth indicate a need to encourage enduring supports for youth who have not reached legal permanency. Foster families are one valuable resource. The Trauma-Informed Partnering for Safety and Permanence – Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (TIPS-MAPP) training used by DCF to train new foster families has a strong emphasis on legal permanency; but it does not emphasize how to continue supporting foster youth who age out of care without permanency. There are many ways to support older foster youth, including but not limited to continuing to provide housing after youth have left the Department’s care. Trainings for foster families should include the support needs of older youth. DCF should also consider mechanisms to support families that do continue to house youth after discharge, including support groups, small stipends, or resource guides.

**Provide a guaranteed 90-day transition period for all youth leaving care.** Adverse outcomes for former foster youth, especially the six percent of youth in one study who became homeless within the first month after leaving care, highlight the need for transitional support. Under current policy, only youth who have successfully completed a post-secondary education or vocational program are entitled to a 90-day transition period of DCF services. During this time, youth receive support while they seek employment, accumulate savings, arrange for housing, and otherwise transition to independence.

In contrast, youth who have failed to meet DCF expectations—who are arguably among the most vulnerable youth—could lose all supports and benefits within ten days if they fail to appeal. For youth who have chosen to leave DCF care rather than pursue postsecondary education, transition times vary. Even if these youth are granted additional time to transition, the uncertainty involved in that process contributes to the instability of these youths’ lives and futures. Guaranteeing extended services for just 90 days to all consenting youth aging out would enable DCF to better prepare youth for stability in their early adult lives with only modest costs.

**Prevent youth from discharging into homelessness, and intervene in the event of homelessness.** The finding that one-third of homeless young adults in Connecticut were previously involved in child welfare indicates that services are needed to prevent and remedy homelessness. Among youth exiting care last year, almost half were living in settings they would likely have to leave. When asked where they would go after leaving care, six percent of exiting youth either said they would be homeless or couch-surfing, did not know where they would go, or could not be located. Even brief periods of homelessness have adverse effects on youth and high costs for the state.
House Bill 14-5304, *An Act Preventing Homelessness For Youth Under the Care of the Commissioner of Children and Families*, called for prevention of discharge of any youth to shelters, motels, or any setting that could not be expected to remain available to the youth for twelve months. It also mandated 45 days of case management “aftercare” for youth exiting under age 21, including assistance finding housing in the event of homelessness. The provisions of this bill would reduce homelessness and its associated adverse outcomes for foster youth. We recommend that this bill’s provisions be reconsidered this year. The Department should also consider periodic check-ins with youth who have aged out to assess housing stability and, if necessary, connect them with community resources.

- **Maintain funding for youth housing and homeless programs.** Intervening in the event of homelessness requires supporting initiatives and programs that serve youth who are vulnerable to or experiencing housing insecurity. These include:
  - Homeless Youth Program (Department of Children and Families)
  - Family Unification Program (Department of Housing)
  - Rental Assistance Program (Department of Housing)
  - Housing and Homelessness line item (Department of Housing)
  - Housing Supports and Services (Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services)
  - Homeless Prevention and Response Fund bond funding.

**Expand data collection and sharing regarding foster youth outcomes.** Better use of data enables program assessment, improvement, and accountability.

- **Integrate data collection and reporting between the State Department of Education and the Department of Children and Families.** Low rates of high school and college completion for youth in care indicate a need for better data integration between the State Department of Education (SDE) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Past studies have shown foster children’s low test scores and high rates of exclusionary discipline and grade level retention. Integrating data collection and reporting between SDE and DCF would help both departments take shared responsibility for improving educational outcomes for foster youth in compliance with and beyond the cooperation required under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

- **Expand data collection regarding youth outcomes after leaving care.** More long-term data are needed to understand the persistence of adverse outcomes for former foster youth despite the existence of extended care and supportive services for some older youth. In compliance with federal law, Connecticut chooses a cohort every three years to interview at age 17, 19, and 21. Some of those data are included within this report. DCF also recently piloted a “Connections and Means Survey” to assess adolescent preparation as they exit care. In order to adequately assess the efficacy of programs, however, the state should establish more targeted data collection concerning (a) vulnerable populations, such as pregnant and parenting youth, (b) recipients of specific services, such as college graduates, and (c) longer-term outcomes past age 21.

  - **Evaluate outcomes for youth leaving independent living and other residential settings.** The diversity of residential settings for older youth in care and surprising data from the Midwest Study regarding associated employment outcomes indicate a need to assess outcomes for youth leaving different residential environments. Independent living in care through the CHAP and CHEER programs is often the least restrictive environment and
enables youth to build skills for later adulthood. As youth in foster care often lack families to provide financial support, they need to learn skills while they still have state supports. In the Midwest Study, however, youth living in non-relative foster homes were the most likely to be employed at age 24. Outcomes data would help the Department prioritize programs and settings that are associated with greater long-term success.

Chapter 6. Conclusions

All children deserve ample opportunities to reach their full social, emotional, and intellectual potentials and become productive members of their communities. For most children, families provide the resources and guidance to ensure success on the path toward adulthood. Connecticut has made great strides towards ensuring that every child finds the permanency of a family, but the state must do more to support youth who age out of the child welfare system without it. Despite increases in adoptions, reunification, and kinship placements, last year almost 300 young adults aged out into adulthood alone. Many of these youth are not ready to be on their own, facing high rates of early parenthood, unstable housing, unemployment, and other adverse outcomes. These youth are likely to have disproportionate contact with other state agencies later in life, including the criminal justice system, the mental health system, and multiple forms of public assistance. By increasing supports for youth over 18, DCF can protect earlier investments in these vulnerable youth and help them launch into adulthood ready to succeed without further need of state support.

This paper identifies affordable recommendations for policy and practices to prepare youth for adulthood. By helping youth plan for the future, supporting connections with adults, lengthening transition times, and preventing youth from discharging into homelessness or unstable housing, the state can better ensure that these youth will be ready for the challenges of adulthood. By collecting more thorough, longitudinal data on youth outcomes, DCF can start to identify further areas of need before youth leave care and evaluate the effectiveness of supports provided.

Supporting successful transitions into adulthood requires a paradigm shift: from one that rewards the highest-achieving, education-focused youth to one that acknowledges the supports needed by all youth aging out of foster care. By meeting youth in care where they are, we can help all foster youth move toward fulfilling their full potential.
Notes

2 DCF data request made by Connecticut Voices for Children, fulfilled on November 25, 2016 by Janet Gonzalez, Office for Research and Evaluation.
3 Unless otherwise stated, all data in Chapter 1, Section A comes from the data request described in Endnote 2.
5 By 21, foster youth in the Midwest Study achieved a similar graduation rate to that of Connecticut foster youth at the time of aging out. See Courtney, Mark, et al, “Executive Summary: Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21,” Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (2007), available at http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/ChapinHallDocument_1.pdf. In contrast, one study in California found that just 58% of twelfth-grade foster youth graduated that year, compared with 84% of other youth. See Barrant, V.X., & Berliner, B., “The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California’s Public Schools,” San Francisco: WestEd (2013).
7 Ibid.
8 Graph shows FY 15 data so as to compare with available Census data from 2015. FY 16 foster youth employment data are discussed in the text.
9 CT Voices analysis of Census 2015 microdata.
11 See Dworsky, Amy and Jan DeCourcey “Pregnant and Parenting Foster Youth: Their Needs, Their Experiences,” Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (2009), available at http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Pregnant_Foster_Youth_final_081109.pdf.
12 Ibid.
13 See email from Janet Gonzalez, DCF, to CT Voices on December 7, 2016.
14 “All children are entitled to a permanent nurturing family which meets their physical, medical, emotional, and educational needs. In most situations this will be a child’s family of origin and the Department of Children and Families will make every effort to support the biological family’s desire to raise their children. However, if it becomes necessary to place a child outside of the family home, then reasonable efforts must be made to reunify the child with his/her family…” See “Legal Risk Adoption,” Connecticut Foster Adopt (2016), available at http://www.ctfosteradopt.com/fosteradopt/cwp/view.asp?a=3795&Q=564926.
17 Information supplied by Linda Dixon, Administrator, Adolescent and Juvenile Justice Services, DCF, on 14 December 2016.

20 “After many years of DCF treatment, many youth are reluctant or have no interest in continuing in another system of care once they reach the age of majority.” See Connecticut General Assembly Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee, “Department of Children and Families Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care” (2014), available at https://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/docs/2013/DCF%20Age%20Out%20Staff%20F&R%20Report.pdf.

21 CT Voices analysis of Connecticut data within the National Youth in Transition Database. 86 of 173 youth interviewed at age 21 who were not in care were receiving public benefits for food, housing, or cash welfare payments.


23 CT Voices analysis of Connecticut data within the National Youth in Transition Database. 50 of 172 youth interviewed at age 21 had been homeless since the last interview at age 19.


25 Ibid. In total, 216 youth from the original study were located at age 21. 34 of 176 youth who were interviewed had been incarcerated since the last interview at age 19, and an additional 22 were unavailable for interview because of active incarceration.


27 CT Voices analysis of Connecticut data within the National Youth in Transition Database. 27 of 173 youth interviewed at age 21 who were not in care were working full-time; 66 were employed part-time; and 80 youth were not working.

28 Courteney et al, 2011.

29 CT Voices analysis of 2015 microdata.

30 Ibid.


32 Ibid.


40 Ibid.
51 See Freisthler, Bridget, Emily Bruce, and Barbara Needell, "Understanding the geospatial relationship of neighborhood characteristics and rates of maltreatment for Black, Hispanic, and White children," Social work 52.1 (2007): 7-16.
58 From the 2008 5-year graduation statistics in National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 326.10: Graduation rate from first institution attended for first-time, full-time bachelor’s degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, time to completion, sex, control of institution, and acceptance rate: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2008,” available at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tabs/dt15_326.10.asp
Connecticut Voices for Children

59 Ibid.
64 Ibid.

67 This list is by no means comprehensive; for a complete documentation of DCF policies, see http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2639&Q=321506.
71 DCF data request made by Connecticut Voices for Children, fulfilled on November 25, 2016 by Janet Gonzalez, Office for Research and Evaluation.


Courtney et al, 2009.


CT Voices analysis of Connecticut data within the National Youth in Transition Database. Put data here.

Dworsky and Courtney, 2010.


CT Voices analysis of Connecticut data within the National Youth in Transition Database. Put data here.

Dworsky et al, 2013.

Ibid.


Courtney et al, 2011.

Ibid.

Hook and Courtney, 2010.

Ibid.


Figure provided in a presentation by Kathryn Parr, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, at an April 2016 Forum, The Next Frontier: Ending Family Homelessness. These findings came from a yet unpublished study by the University of Connecticut on the costs of homelessness. The presentation is available at http://www.pshousing.org/files/CECHI_4_21_16-2final.pdf.

From the DCF Youth Advisory Board (YAB) Transition from Care document, still in draft form as of 13 December 2016. Commissioner Katz tasked the YAB in late 2015 with generating a list of their needs before they leave care. Connecticut Voices for Children provided some policy expertise and assistance with the generation of this document.

Youth Advisory Boards are select groups of older youth in DCF care, convened by DCF to advise on policy and other matters.
107 Referring to comments made by Youth Advisory Board members in different DCF regions asking about policies concerning post-secondary education, adolescent specialists, transition time, independent living, and other issues.

108 According to conversation with Stacey Violante Cote, Center for Children’s Advocacy, on 7 December 2016.


113 Information provided by Josh Fisher, Quality Assurance, DCF, on 9 December 2016.


