

POLICY AND PRACTICE REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

Take Our Survey



Addressing Systemwide Racial Disproportionalities and Disparities

Addressing systemwide racial disproportionalities and disparities requires an approach focusing on both systemic reforms and targeted interventions. It also requires a concerted effort across all levels of the child welfare system and adjacent systems. Outlined below are solutions that can help address disparate policies and practices that produce disproportionate outcomes. They include recommendations for data collection analyses, cultural competency and anti-racist approaches and training for child welfare practitioners, and policy reforms that can result in practice and policy change.

By implementing these recommendations, the child welfare system can move toward greater equity, and all children, youth and families having the support they need to thrive.

1. Develop recruitment and retention supports to help ensure the child welfare workforce understands the child welfare population and have insight from lived experience
2. Create and disseminate training and other supports for those with lived experience working with children and youth in and exiting child welfare to assist in addressing relived trauma through their employment
3. Encourage counties to utilize the Disproportionality Diagnostic Tool created by the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators to help counties identify gaps, areas for improvement, and agency strengths that can support equitable representation
4. Direct the California Department of Social Services, with stakeholder input, to improve data collection related to reports of neglect
5. Develop system capacity in CWS-CARES to systematically track the reason a maltreatment report does not meet the criteria for a referral, to help develop a better understanding of why older youth, including unaccompanied youth, and youth in homeless families have higher rates of reports "evaluated out"
6. Develop system capacity in CWS-CARES to collect data on self-petitions for court dependency under Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) Sections 329 and 331, as well as the outcomes of those petitions, to provide a better understanding of whether older youth experience relative challenges gaining access to foster care, even if their rate of entry into foster care following substantiation of maltreatment is equivalent to rates for younger youth
7. Develop system capacity in CWS-CARES to collect data on whether reports related to maltreatment are self-reported by Transition Age Youth or reported by someone else to provide insight into whether older and younger youth are treated differently when they self-report maltreatment rather than when it is reported by others
8. Monitor outcomes for youth with prior reports of abuse and neglect for safety, permanency, and well being

Supporting Successful Transitions to Adulthood

Transition services and supports are critical for youth as they age out of care and become independent adults. Youth in the foster care system often have experienced a history of abuse, neglect, and trauma that led to their placement in care. This trauma can be compounded during their time in care as they are separated from their family, and as they experience instability if they frequently move between placements. A lack of supportive adults and an unstable home environment also pose significant challenges for youth as they transition to adulthood.

Moreover, transition age youth face obstacles in education, housing, employment, and mental health that can negatively impact their transition to adulthood. Youth in foster care are far less likely to earn a high school diploma in four years (61%) than students overall (87%). In addition, although 93% of youth in foster care say they want to go to college, only 8% obtain an associate's or bachelor's degree by age 26. Over half of transition age youth in foster care experience homelessness (including couch-surfing) between the ages 17 and 21. A 2024 report from the California Policy Lab on Aging Out of Foster Care in Los Angeles highlighted data on transition age youth who are more likely to experience homelessness: "Those who eventually experience homelessness are more likely to be Black, and the gap is largest for Black TAY who identify as female; 32 percent of those experiencing homelessness were Black and female vs. 15 percent of all TAY in foster care."

These poor outcomes demonstrate the need for transition services to be strengthened and individualized. While Extended Foster Care provides services for TAY past age 18, a drop-off in supports and services occurs when they exit EFC and are left without funding and wraparound services to try to independently navigate adulthood. Each youth needs support and lasting frameworks for success as they exit care.

The following policy and practice changes encourage the development of a stronger network of transition aged supports to set young adults up for a successful independent adulthood.

1. Encourage and support cross-system collaboration at the state and local levels between child welfare and other public systems including education, juvenile justice, public benefits (including medical and behavioral health services) and other support services
2. Encourage the California Child Welfare Council to establish a Transition Age Youth Council to review policies and practices impacting youth and to suggest policy reforms to ensure statewide policies and practices meet the needs and are reflective of lived experience
3. Provide enhanced training for Foster Family Agencies, Short-term Residential Therapeutic Programs, and county social workers to support transition age youth in accessing housing and support services while in care and when exiting care
4. Create culturally appropriate and trauma-informed training to support Child and Family Team members in their role on the Team including specialized training for youth
5. Develop system capacity in CWS-CARES to populate all benefits and support services options (for example, Emergency Child Care Bridge, service providers, etc.) to support social workers when working with transition age youth
6. Ensure expungements and vacatur are initiated prior to exit through records checks (with voluntary consent from youth)
7. Ensure all youth who would like support from adults, including peer supporters, CASAs, or mentors, are assigned supporters with TAY-focused education, including training on how to engage with youth with a culturally sensitive, trauma-informed approach, and how to access available housing, public benefits and education and career resources

8. Ensure continuity of care and warm handoffs when youth transition between counties or require services in another county
9. Leverage step-down supports including building savings accounts
10. Ensure 90-day transition plans include concrete information and options regarding housing, health insurance (including enrollment in Former Foster Youth Medi-Cal), education, mentorship and continuing support services, workforce supports and employment services, healthcare power of attorney and advance healthcare directives, and public benefits (including Social Security Administration), in close collaboration with youth
11. Encourage CDSS and counties to collect data on when and why Transitional Independent Living Plans are updated and to update the plans more frequently, to ensure updates are serving the youth's best interest
12. Develop Independent Living Program and other trainings, with youth input, to assist youth in achieving their goals, including financial literacy and life skills (such as budgeting, financial management, tax preparation and filing, consumer purchases and credit, finding and retaining housing, understanding landlord/tenant relations, and housing maintenance)
13. Develop Independent Living Program and/or other training and assistance to support youth in building or rebuilding, at their discretion, a relationship with parents or other family members as adults
14. Utilize data from required CDSS Independent Living Program Annual Narrative Survey Report to share best practices to ensure counties and stakeholders have better cross system collaboration
15. Require CDSS to update guidelines for county Independent Living Program best practices to support successful transition to adulthood and consistency across counties
16. Provide training, technical assistance and resources/information to Juvenile Court judges to prevent unnecessary exits from Extended Foster Care

Providing Housing Stability and Preventing Exits to Homelessness

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a challenging time for young people attempting to acquire fundamental resources like shelter. Youth need stable housing to be successful in other aspects of their lives like career and educational attainment. However, California has one of the highest rates in the country of youth experiencing homelessness, with one in four foster youth experiencing homelessness after leaving Extended Foster Care. Across all our interviews, safe and stable housing was frequently cited as a resource that was difficult to attain.

One of the first challenges youth encounter is understanding and navigating the complex array of housing resources. Many cited a lack of information on available resources in and out of care. Youth received limited information and were unable to develop a clear plan on the steps they needed to take to obtain stable housing. When they sought information from supportive adults, a common response youth received was that they had to seek out the information for themselves. Case workers or probation officers often believed youths' age meant they should be responsible for navigating their own housing options, even if those youth were not in SILPs. This lack of support caused youth to struggle to obtain safe and stable housing, as they were unaware of application and documentation requirements and did not have experience or training in locating and applying for housing. One respondent described having to drive across the state to a shelter to avoid sleeping in their car; only with the help of adults at the shelter were they able to navigate the process of applying for Housing Choice Vouchers that enabled them to eventually secure stable housing. Most youth felt they had to work exceptionally hard to self-advocate to secure housing resources.

A particular area that youth expressed difficulty navigating was how to obtain housing support during the transition from being in care to exiting care. While learning to be self-sufficient is a crucial part of becoming an adult, youth often rely on supportive adults to help them navigate where to begin and through challenges as they arise. In addition, securing housing often requires knowledge of necessary documents, how to obtain them, and completing lengthy, required paperwork. Fees, complex applications, and complicated enrollment processes all serve as significant barriers for youth to navigate on their own. One youth emphasized that "no matter what age you are in life, having a teacher to help you learn how to help yourself is crucial to success."

Youth of color cited their perception of biases adding to the other barriers they faced. Respondents felt their physical appearance was considered in the decision-making process, during interviews with housing navigators or case workers who determined their housing placement. In one interview, a youth with lived experience was told she did not look "poor enough" in her appearance when applying for housing and was told to come back appearing more destitute to be approved. Another youth shared that they were told they could not seek shelter because only certain races would be welcomed at the shelter when they sought out housing at a particular facility.

Another common challenge youth expressed was the difficulty of being accepted as a tenant while in and exiting Extended Foster Care. Youth faced challenges procuring housing placements that would accept their vouchers or SILP payments, as landlords were apprehensive to rent to youth in care, fearing they would be risky tenants who would default on payments without parental figures who could co-sign and help share in or take responsibility. Numerous individuals with lived experience shared how their application was automatically denied because they did not have an adult to co-sign when they showed a landlord their voucher or SILP payment. The stigma of being in care, or simply being without an adult to co-sign in contrast with young people who do have co-signors, left many homeless. Others shared how they were unable to find housing in a safe neighborhood that fit within their housing budget. With rising housing costs, many youth were left homeless while looking for affordable and safe housing in a community in which they felt safe and was close to school or work opportunities.

When youth age out of the foster care system, they face a steep decline in services and supports that leaves them at risk of experiencing homelessness. To combat housing practices that exacerbate the effects of racial

disproportionality, emphasize procedures that promote equal housing access for all transition age youth, and provide housing stability as a foundational resource for young adults to build their futures.

1. Prevent youth experiencing homelessness while in care by building systems capacity and removing artificial barriers to housing entry
2. Promote a true housing continuum for transition age youth by reimagining housing options
3. Encourage development, in partnership with youth, of a comprehensive housing plan through the required development and updating of their Transitional Independent Living Plan to address changing needs as they age and progress in achieving their goals
4. Maximize access to and use of FYI housing vouchers
5. Provide training, technical assistance and resources/information to Family Urgent Response System statewide hotline staff to address calls from current and former foster youth related to housing instability and homelessness
6. Ensure counties provide on demand access to housing and other supportive services
7. Provide training and technical assistance to counties, housing providers and housing navigators to prevent exclusionary or discriminatory practices from destabilizing housing security and to promote successful housing transitions

Accessing Concrete Supports

Supporting Transitions

Guaranteed Income (GI) programs are no-strings-attached social safety nets that provide a financial floor for participants. The California Guaranteed Income Pilot Program provides grants to eligible entities, that then provide a guaranteed income to participants. The California Department of Social Services prioritized funding for pilot programs that serve California residents who age out of extended foster care at or after 21 years of age or who are pregnant individuals. The Department is evaluating the pilots. Local jurisdictions have also created GI programs, like Los Angeles County's Breathe program. These pilots have shown significant, positive results for participants.

Findings show that GI programs allow participants to save for the future, improve their financial well-being, have sufficient food, reduce their housing cost burdens, reduce stress, and maintain their physical health.

1. Incorporate evaluation outcomes to refine and launch continued Guaranteed Income programs for youth exiting extended foster care and expectant and parenting youth in foster care

Preventing Food Insecurity

Poverty is a root cause of food insecurity, and because former foster youth are at a disproportionately higher risk for poverty when they age out of care, many are impacted by food insecurity. According to the National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI), 33% of surveyed former foster youth in California said they experienced food insecurity when they left the system. Youth are more likely to have lifelong health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, or cancer if they struggle to access food or healthy food options. Food insecurity is also detrimental to mental health, as the stress of not knowing where the next meal will come from can contribute to anxiety or depression. Accordingly, fighting food insecurity among transition age youth can help youth increase their stability and healthy development.

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides funds to states to provide nutrition benefits to qualified low-income individuals and families. California's SNAP program is known as CalFresh and is administered locally by county human services agencies. SNAP benefits are an important resource that can help young people get groceries and food support and can serve as a crucial buffer against food insecurity as youth transition into adulthood. However, some of SNAP's eligibility rules serve as a barrier for youth to gain access to benefits or maintain participation.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) sets specific national eligibility requirements for SNAP programs, including a gross and net income test, work requirements and other documentation requirements. One of the most significant is the Time Limit for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs). Under this restriction, a single, healthy person between the ages of 18 and 49 who is not working at least 80 hours a month can only receive three months' worth of SNAP benefits within a three-year period. Youth transitioning out of care do not always have the capacity to meet these work requirements and are at a disadvantage.

Another barrier youth in Extended Foster Care can face is being disqualified for SNAP benefits due to their SILP payments. Any portion of an NMD's foster care payment received directly by the NMD, such as a SILP payment, is counted as income when determining income eligibility. The SILP payment coupled with any income they are currently making can potentially disqualify an NMD from receiving Cal-Fresh, even if they are struggling to meet their basic food needs. This policy of excluding foster care payments from income should be applied across all state programs for which youth may be eligible.

The following policy recommendations aim to help NMDs combat barriers to receiving SNAP benefits and help promote food stability.

1. Require CDSS to establish a state-funded program to provide food assistance for NMDs who are residing in a Supervised Independent Living Placement or a transitional living setting
2. Incorporate food education into Independent Living Program and other life skills courses

Promoting and Attaining Educational Goals

Students in foster care face a range of challenges to their educational success, including high rates of school mobility, high rates of suspension and absenteeism, and a lack of ties to their community. Students in foster care often face complex challenges arising from instability in their living placements. Removal from the family home or changes in foster care placements result in students moving to new schools or districts, having to frequently adjust to a new school environment, and find a new sense of stability. Getting used to new teachers and a new school curriculum, attempting to maintain continuity in their learning, and finding new social connections at school are some of the challenges they face.

School changes can drastically set back students' educational progress and lead to gaps in learning and development. Education disparities early in life can also lead to major consequences for youth trying to successfully transition into adulthood. There is a direct correlation with their increased likelihood of homelessness, addiction, chronic physical and mental illness, as well as involvement in the criminal justice system, for youth in care who are behind in their education.

Conversely, early educational success for youth in foster care helps them combat disparities as they transition into adulthood. During interviews, youth with lived experience expressed the need for greater post-secondary education and career preparation. A college/career navigator was cited as one of the top resources needed to excel in their transitions to adulthood. Many former and current youth in foster care shared a perceived experience of stigma and bias when attempting to access education support. Adults and counselors at school would often dismiss their education aspirations and tell the youth to focus on just getting through the current moment. This focus on the present at the expense of the future left them feeling insecure about their ability to succeed post-high school, often discouraging them from setting goals for post-secondary education and reducing their confidence in their ability to succeed in school. Youth felt shut out of planning conversations and unable to gain access to resources that would help them apply to college or career education schools.

The following policy recommendations are intended to address education and career discrepancies youth in care face.

1. Ensure social workers, probation officers, Educational Rights Holders, and caregivers assist youth in understanding and accessing CalKIDS accounts
2. Ensure middle school and high school counselors and Foster Youth Education Liaisons prioritize supporting transition age youth in achieving their high school diploma or GED, with college and career preparation and readiness, and identifying career aspirations and goals
3. Develop specialized training for Educational Rights Holders and other supportive adults on their role and responsibilities and opportunities available to youth in foster care, including education and graduation rights and support services in high school and in higher education (including career education, apprenticeship programs, colleges, and universities) to help ensure no youth is exiting care without a high school diploma or GED and is supported in establishing and achieving educational goals
4. Encourage continued Juvenile Court oversight on educational progress and status of Educational Rights Holder to promote educational stability, achievement, and support for attaining educational goals

Ensuring Timely Access to Behavioral Health Services

Many youth in foster care experience trauma, instability, or some form of loss which may lead to behavioral health challenges. As these young people transition to adulthood, the support they receive during this critical period can profoundly impact their long-term wellbeing and success. It is essential that this support comes from culturally relevant, trauma-informed providers and social workers who understand the nuances of trauma and are also deeply aware of and sensitive to the cultural background of the youth they serve.

Ensuring timely access to behavioral health services can produce timely interventions that can help youth develop coping and life skills, which can in turn reduce the likelihood of economic and housing instability, chronic health issues, and incarceration.

Implementing the recommendations detailed below can help prevent a range of preventable negative outcomes.

1. Ensure Managed Care Plans are coordinating with Mental Health Plans to ensure timely access to behavioral health services for transition age youth
2. Ensure youth are timely and appropriately referred for Specialty Mental Health Services
3. Ensure implementation of the Behavioral Health Services Act modernization fully accounts for needs of current and former foster youth
4. Ensure availability of, access to, and knowledge of behavioral health providers and peer supporters reflective of the youth's culture and community and ensure continuity of care
5. Develop understanding of and access to alternative therapies and strengths-building activities to support mental health and develop training for Medi-Cal providers on how to develop mental health plans to include alternative therapies
6. Invest in community education focused on the behavioral health needs of young people and the ways in which community or cultural stigma plays into the perception of behavioral health supports, destigmatizing the use of behavioral health services and reducing behavioral health services requests being used or viewed as a punishment or retaliation

Preventing Permanency Disruptions and Supporting Permanency Options to Avoid Instability

Providing permanency options for transition age youth is necessary to ensure stability, support, and successful transitions into adulthood. Permanency options should reflect the unique needs and circumstances of each youth in care. Permanency also should be envisioned and planned as broader than legal permanency, as establishing relational permanency and connectedness with a network of natural supports is a significant support in the transition to adulthood.

The California Youth Task Force defines youth permanency as “Lifelong support in the context of reunification, a legal adoption, or guardianship, where possible; and in which the youth have the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons, including brothers and sisters. A broad array of individualized permanency options exists; reunification and adoption are an important two among many that may be appropriate.”

Approximately 4,000 youth annually exit foster care with no connection to family or familial support. It is crucial to understand that permanency options require flexibility as youth and family situations vary. Current permanency options can include probate guardianship, dependency guardianship, adoption, and reunification. There are some cases in which safety concerns pose a risk to the youth and reunification is not an option, and others in which family relationships provide stability and security.

Families and youth should be presented with an array of permanency options and given the tools to help them understand the options. In addition, youth voice should be central to the decision-making process and reflected in permanency decisions.

1. A range of permanency options, including relational permanency, should be identified and considered for transition age youth to support transitions
2. Amend Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) section 388.1 to allow former foster youth between ages 18 and 21 whose adoption or guardianship disrupts to petition the court to re-enter EFC without having to first ensure that funding has terminated

Targeting Supports for Expectant and Parenting Youth

Expectant and parenting youth (EPY), particularly those in the child welfare system, face many challenges that can impact their ability to achieve stability and support. These young people must manage the dual responsibility of navigating their own development and providing for their children, all while dealing with the vulnerabilities that come with being in or having recently exited the foster care system. Targeted support is essential to ensure that these young parents can provide a safe, nurturing environment for their children. As noted above, “one in 10 report becoming a parent between ages 17 to 19 while nearly one in four (23%) say they became parents between ages 19 to 21.” Targeted support is a critical investment in the future of both the current and next generation, fostering healthier families and communities.

Policy recommendations that can better support expectant and parenting youth include:

1. Prioritize utilization of State Family First Prevention Services Program Block Grant funding and build an evidence base for Expectant and Parenting Youth Conferences
2. Implement strategies to ensure expectant parents are connected to home visiting programs
3. Encourage counties to prioritize Expectant and Parenting Youth for Emergency Child Care Bridge, or other childcare subsidies, and transportation services and allow license-exempt childcare providers
4. Develop and implement a specialized Expectant Parenting Plan as part of the Transitional Independent Living Plan (or as a standalone for expectant parents under age 16)
5. Develop and implement specialized Expectant and Parenting Youth training to support social workers

Targeting Supports for Youth Victimized by Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) refers to any activity or crime that involves the sexual abuse and exploitation of a child for monetary or nonmonetary benefit. Data on commercially sexually exploited youth are limited due to underreporting. However, case studies have been conducted to paint a better picture of the concerns regarding CSE. Youth in foster care are particularly vulnerable to CSE due to factors like unstable living accommodations, histories of trauma and lack of consistent, supportive adult relationships. Youth must be equipped with the tools to recognize and respond to signs of exploitation.

In 2014, Senate Bill (SB) 855 amended the statutes to create the state's Opt-In Commercially Sexually Exploited Child (CSEC) Program. This program gives participating county child welfare agencies guidance and funding to prevent and intervene on behalf of children who are experiencing or at risk of CSE.

These recommendations promote transparency and are a targeted approach to support youth at risk of or victimized by CSE:

1. Ensure safe, appropriate, and available emergency and transitional housing and supports for victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and ensure safe settings for youth who have run away or are missing from care to stabilize and locate a new placement in a timely manner
2. Update CWS-CARES system capacity to collect data to enhance counties' supports and engagement to better support youth victimized by commercial sexual exploitation
3. Develop and implement specialized services and training to address the needs of youth victimized by Commercial Sexual Exploitation that includes integrated Substance Use Disorder treatment
4. Encourage the California Child Welfare Council to review the intersection of labor trafficking and other exploitation and the child welfare system and youth in foster care and to suggest data-informed policy reforms to ensure policies and practices meet the needs and are reflective of lived experience