

# Supporting Their Journey:

## The Path to Racial Equity in Child Welfare for Transition Age Youth

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## PROJECT SUMMARY

In 2021, the Alliance for Children’s Rights published **“The Path to Racial Equity in Child Welfare: Valuing Family and Community.”**<sup>1</sup> In that report, we explored racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system, the various policies and practices that have dictated how children and families in foster care are treated, and the ways that permanency and reunification are achieved and supported. Children of color, and specifically Black and Native American children, continue to experience disparities at every stage of the child welfare system: maltreatment reports, investigations, case substantiations, service referrals, out-of-home placements, family reunification, termination of parental rights, and time spent in foster care. These disparities and disproportionalities compound as youth continue to be involved in the system, leading to disparate outcomes as they age into adulthood. The inequities young adults face in the system lead to adverse outcomes including low educational attainment, high rates of unemployment and poverty, homelessness, mental illness, incarceration, and premature death.

This report is intended to continue the conversations and recommendations to address racial disparities and disproportionalities in the child welfare system. It builds on our initial report focused on entry into the system to examine the racial disparities and inequities transition age youth, those aged 16-24, experience while in and exiting the foster care system and the ways in which those inequities are driven by systemic factors, such as implicit bias, socioeconomic inequality, and inadequate access to culturally responsive services, and makes recommendations for policy and practice changes to ameliorate those disparities. Engaging through listening sessions, surveys, and interviews with youth with lived experience, parents, caregivers, service providers, state and local regulators, and other stakeholders, we heard that targeted policy and practice changes can improve experiences in foster care for those who have disproportionately come to the attention of the child welfare system and have languished in the system.

The proposed policy and practice reforms in this report represent a blueprint for a child welfare system that is truly equitable, just and transparent for youth in care and aging out of the foster care system.

### These reforms strive to achieve the following objectives:

- Addressing Systemwide Racial Disproportionalities and Disparities
- Supporting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Providing Housing Stability and Preventing Exits to Homelessness
- Accessing Concrete Supports
  - Preventing Food Insecurity
  - Promoting Attaining Educational Goals
  - Ensuring Timely Access to Behavioral Health Services
- Addressing Permanency Disruptions and Permanency Options to Avoid Instability
- Targeting Supports for Expectant and Parenting Youth
- Targeting Supports for Youth Victimized by Commercial Sexual Exploitation

These targeted policy and practice reforms aim to combat the impacts of systemic disparities and disproportionalities and foster stability and expand economic and educational opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing for transition age youth.

This report and the accompanying summit would not be possible without the activism and advocacy of Black, Native American, and Latino youth who have been and continue to be disproportionately harmed by the child welfare system. Youth in foster care are resilient and remarkable.

<sup>1</sup> Alliance for Children’s Rights, (2021), The Path to Racial Justice and Equity: Valuing Family and Community.



# BACKGROUND: Beginnings of Racially Disparate Outcomes

The child welfare system, designed to protect and support vulnerable children and families, paradoxically perpetuates significant racial inequities that can cause more harm than support, particularly to families of color. Despite continual reform efforts noted in our prior report, disproportionalities and disparities in the child welfare system continue to exist and perpetually affect transition age youth, particularly along racial and socioeconomic lines. Structural racism embedded within the child welfare system and surrounding systems continues to be a driving force in negative outcomes for all children in foster care. These inequities manifest in various ways, including higher rates of entry into the system, longer stays in care, and fewer permanent placement outcomes for youth of color, especially Black and Native American youth. Both nationally and in California, Black and Native American children are overrepresented in the child welfare system. As detailed in our first report, families of diverse racial backgrounds are more likely to experience inequitable outcomes due to factors such as oversurveillance and overrepresentation in these systems. As of April 2024, the California Child Welfare Indicators Project reported a total of 42,321 children and youth (0-21) with an open child welfare or probation supervised case. Of the over 42,000 children and youth, 23,199 or 54.8% are Latino, 8,593 or 20.3% are Black and 535 or 1.3% are Native American. Compared to the statewide population of children, Latino children and youth are overrepresented by 4.3 percent; Black children and youth are overrepresented by 15.2 percent and Native American children and youth are overrepresented by 1.26 percent.

Racial disparities occur at every decision-making point in the child welfare continuum from entry to exit, which in turn results in children or young people languishing in a placement prior to permanency, not achieving permanency, or having permanency, including reunification, disrupted by some barrier, bias or perception. Factors that influence these inequities, such as biased perceptions and stereotypes, impact the ways in which our systems, and the people engaged in those systems, interact with youth of various racial backgrounds – from reports to child welfare hotlines to landlord bias about renting to youth in foster care.

Disproportionality describes a condition when the percentage of persons of a certain race or ethnicity in a target population differs from the percentage of persons of the same group in a reference (or base) population. In the child welfare system, disproportionality occurs when the proportion of one group in the child welfare population (e.g., children in foster care) is either proportionately larger (overrepresented) or smaller (underrepresented) than in the general population. While disproportionality refers to the state of being out of proportion, disparity refers to a state of being unequal. Disparity occurs when the ratio of one racial or ethnic group in an event is not equal to the ratio of another racial or ethnic group who experienced the same event. In the child welfare system, disparity is used to describe inequitable outcomes experienced by one racial or ethnic group at various decision-making points compared to another racial or ethnic group. Disparities can occur at every decision-making point, including the initial report of alleged maltreatment, acceptance of reports for investigation, substantiation of maltreatment, entries into substitute care, and exits from care.<sup>2</sup>

Disparate treatment of children and youth with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in the child welfare system has a correlation with the outcomes of the children involved. Black children are overrepresented in reports of suspected maltreatment before the age of 18.<sup>3</sup> Black and Native American children are at greater risk than other children of being confirmed for maltreatment and placed in out-of-home care.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, nearly one-in-two Black and Native American children experience some level of child welfare

<sup>2</sup> Dettlaff, A.J., et al. Identifying and Describing Disproportionality and Disparities in Child Welfare: A Critical Discussion of Race and Research Methods.

<sup>3</sup> Krase, K. S. (2013), Differences in racially disproportionate reporting of child maltreatment across report sources, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 7, 351–369.

<sup>4</sup> Yi, Y., Edwards, F. R. & Wildeman, C., (2020), Cumulative prevalence of confirmed maltreatment and foster care placements for US children by race/ethnicity, 2011-2016, *American Journal of Public Health*, 110, 704–709.

system involvement by the time they turned 18 (compared to around 29 percent of Hispanic/Latino children, 22 percent of white children, and 13 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander children).

Further data highlights 3.2 percent of Black children in California and 3.8 percent of Native American children in California experienced termination of parental rights, compared to 1.3 percent of white children (and 0.8 percent and 0.3 percent of Hispanic and Asian children, respectively). This means California's Native American children were more than three times more likely than white children, and more than 12 times more likely than Asian children, to have their legal relationship with their biological parents severed by the time they turned 18.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a report from the California Homeless Youth Project found that both white and African American youth described similar and significant family dysfunction, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; neglect and abandonment; and parental drug abuse in their childhood homes, and they were of similar ages (15 years old on average) when they first became unstably housed. However, African American youth were more likely to report they had been removed from their homes and placed in foster care than white youth (61 percent versus 23 percent).<sup>6</sup> Black children spend more time in foster care,<sup>7</sup> are less likely to reunify with their families,<sup>8</sup> and are less likely to receive services compared to white children.<sup>9</sup>

Underrepresentation also exists within the child welfare system. Nationally, in contrast with California, Latino children are underrepresented in the foster care population, as well as Asian and white children. Two theories exist as to why underrepresentation may occur: lower occurrences of child maltreatment among these populations or underreporting motivated by societal norms or cultural perceptions that child welfare practitioners may have regarding this subset population.

With disparities occurring at every major decision-making point along the child welfare continuum, implicit racial bias (i.e., unconscious attitudes and beliefs) and explicit racial bias (i.e., overt acts of discrimination and prejudice) impact families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds during reporting, investigation, substantiation, and out-of-home placement. In 2021, the California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) reported that both Black and Native American children were roughly three times more likely than white children to experience deep poverty. Poverty along with other risk factors can enhance the surveillance of families by intersecting systems (e.g., financial or housing assistance) leaving families vulnerable to entry into the child welfare system. Youth who remain in the system experience these disparities at a compounding rate as they age.

There are many factors that contribute to racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system, but it is significant to note, "theories for why disproportionalities and disparities occur are conflicting due to demographic, practice, policy, and other differences at the national, state, and local levels and to the fact that this is an exceptionally complex issue."<sup>10</sup> Factors such as socioeconomic status, higher rates of poverty, racial bias and discrimination from child welfare practitioners, policies, and legislation, as well as structural racism, are all factors that contribute to racial disparities.

<sup>5</sup> Petek, G., (2024), California's Child Welfare System Addressing Disproportionalities and Disparities LAO.

<sup>6</sup> Auerswald, C. & Puddefoot, G., (2012), Comparing White and African American Homeless Youth in San Francisco: Research Findings and Policy Implications, California State Library.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, (2007), African American children in foster care: Additional HHS assistance needed to help states reduce the proportion in care (GAO-07-816).

<sup>8</sup> Lu, Y. E., Landsverk, J., Ellis-Macleod, E., Newton, R., Ganger, W. & Johnson, I., (2004), Race, ethnicity, and case outcomes in child protective services. Children and Youth Services Review, 26, 447-461.

<sup>9</sup> Garcia, A. R., Kim, M. & DeNard, C., (2016), Context matters: The state of racial disparities in mental health services among youth reported to child welfare in 1999 and 2009, Children and Youth Services Review, 66, 101-108.

<sup>10</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, (2021), Separating Poverty From Neglect, Child Welfare and Poverty - Poverty and Child Welfare - OACAS Library Guides at Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies.



## Disparities and Disproportionalities for Transition Age Youth

Transition age youth, affected by front-end disparities, continue to experience disparities while in foster care resulting in greater challenges securing safety nets when aging out of the system. Explanatory factors such as racial discrimination and bias, and system factors such as facing greater barriers in accessing support and services and geographic location, directly impact TAY.

Due to biased perceptions and disparities in the child welfare system, youth who enter the system and do not achieve permanency prior to turning 18 are often stigmatized and experience instability at higher rates. A 2024 LAO report, "California's Child Welfare System Addressing Disproportionalities and Disparities," highlighted that youth with foster care experience face the long-term consequences of having experienced the trauma of child abuse or neglect and being removed from their homes. These compounding experiences coincide with the challenges that young people face throughout their journey in the child welfare system.

The data below highlights some of the risk factors (e.g., social, economic, and racial factors) that heighten the challenges associated with transition age youth in the child welfare system:

### Transition Age Youth in Foster Care:

- As of April 2024, of the 42,321 children and youth in foster care in California, 11,365 youth were 16 - 21.<sup>11</sup>

### Lower Permanency Rates:

- Nationally, there are more than 20,000 youth who age out of the foster care system each year, and in California there are about 3,000 youth who age out of the child welfare system without having achieved permanency with a family.
- According to a KidsData report, of the children and youth exiting foster care in 2020, "more than one in eight aged out of the system without being reunited with their families or connected with another permanent family."<sup>12</sup>

### Key Findings:

- Youth who do not achieve permanency through reunification, adoption or guardianship have, on average, more and earlier pregnancies, lower educational attainment, increased involvement with the justice system, and poor employment outcomes.<sup>13</sup>
- One in five report experiencing homelessness between ages 17 and 19, and over one in four (29%) report being homeless from 19 to 21. Among American Indian and Alaska Native young adults, that figure jumps to almost half (43%) for ages 19 to 21.<sup>14</sup>
- One in five report being incarcerated between ages 17 and 19 as well as ages 19 to 21. Data by state, race, and ethnicity is available in the appendix.<sup>15</sup>

Analyzing the ways in which youth are impacted by these disparities and disproportionalities can assist in the creation of policy interventions that can help create the safeguards for a thriving future. The data highlights the need to reshape and reimagine not only how the system engages with youth in preparing

<sup>11</sup> California Child Welfare Indicators Project, (2024), Point in Time/In Care.

<sup>12</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, (2024), Child Welfare and Foster Care Statistics.

<sup>13</sup> Becker, M.A., Jordan, N. & Larsen, R., (2007), Predictors of successful permanency planning and length of stay in foster care: The role of race, diagnosis and place of residence. Children and Youth Services Review, 29, 1102-1113.

<sup>14</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, (2024), Child Welfare and Foster Care Statistics.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

them to exit the child welfare system, but also the need for perception shifts among all the supportive adults who have impact on the lives of transition age youth: from mandated reporters to social workers, from minor’s counsel to policymakers, from service and housing providers to Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) and mentors.

## Background on Extended Foster Care

The California Fostering Connections to Success Act was signed into law on September 30, 2010, through Assembly Bill (AB) 12. It created California’s Extended Foster Care (EFC) Program, which allows eligible youth in the child welfare and probation systems to remain in foster care until age 21.<sup>16</sup> Eligible foster youth are designated as “nonminor dependents” (NMDs). To be eligible for EFC, youth must be at least 18 but under 21 years of age, and on their 18th birthday be subject to a foster care placement order placing them under the care, custody, and control of a county child welfare agency, probation department or tribal agency.

**Youth also must meet one of the following participation criteria while in EFC. They must be:**

1. Working toward completion of high school or equivalent program (e.g. GED);
2. Enrolled in college, community college or a vocational education program;
3. Employed at least 80 hours a month;
4. Participating in a program designed to assist in gaining employment; or
5. Unable to do one of the above requirements because of a documented medical condition.

The youth and their social worker or probation officer must work together to develop a Transitional Independent Living Case Plan (TILCP), which includes the youth’s plan for their transition to independence. The youth must sign an agreement to meet with a social worker or probation officer once a month and work to meet the goals outlined in their Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP), a case plan document that details the services and support to be provided to the youth to support a successful transition into adulthood.

Remaining in foster care after age 18 is voluntary. Youth in foster care may exit at age 18, and NMDs can exit at any subsequent time before age 21. Youth who exit foster care at 18 or EFC before turning 21 can petition the juvenile court to re-enter foster care at any time before age 21.

**Eligible placement options for NMDs include:**

- A certified Resource Family home, the home of a relative or Non-Related Extended Family Member (NREFM), a licensed foster family home, or a certified foster family agency home.
- A Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP).
- A Transitional Housing Placement Program for Nonminor Dependents (THPP-NMD). This placement option provides housing and intensive support services. There are three housing models:
  - a host family where the NMD lives with a caring adult who has been selected and approved by the transitional housing provider;
  - a staffed site where the NMD lives in an apartment, condominium or single-family dwelling rented or leased by the housing provider with staff living on site; or
  - a remote site where the NMD lives independently in one of the housing types listed above with regular supervision from the provider.

<sup>16</sup> AB 12 - California Fostering Connections to Success Act, (Chapter 559, Statutes of 2010).

- A Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP). This placement option allows youth to live independently in a variety of settings. They may live alone or with roommate(s) while still receiving supervision from a social worker or probation officer. Social workers must determine youth are ready for a SILP through a SILP Readiness Assessment, and the housing unit must meet health and safety standards as determined by a facility inspection prior to the youth moving in.

Youth who receive Adoption Assistance Program (AAP) payments, Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payments (Kin-GAP), or Non-Related Legal Guardianship (NRLG) payments are eligible to continue receiving payments to age 21 if they meet the following requirements:

1. The AAP or Kin-GAP negotiated payment agreement was signed after the youth turned age 16,
2. An adopted youth or youth is in a Kin-GAP guardianship and has a documented disability; or
3. A youth is in a NRLG or a Kin-GAP guardianship with a nonrelative extended family member (NREFM). These youth are automatically eligible for extended benefits to age 21.

Additionally, the youth must participate in the development of their TILCP and meet at least one of the participation criteria listed above.

In 2014, Assembly Bill 2454<sup>17</sup> was signed into law, allowing a former foster youth to re-enter foster care if, while there are between 18 and 21, their former guardian no longer provides them with support. Prior to the passage of AB 2454, California's Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12) precluded a former foster youth from re-entering foster care as an NMD if that former foster youth had been adopted or was under a guardianship when they turned 18 and that relationship failed, leaving the youth without the supports and services of EFC.

## Available Housing Resources for Transition Age Youth<sup>18</sup>

### Youth with Open Juvenile Court Cases

- **Transitional Housing Placement Program for Nonminor Dependents (THPP-NMD)**  
THPP-NMD is a program for nonminor dependents ages 18 to 21 that offers agency-supervised apartment or house living secured by the THPP-NMD agency. To be eligible, a youth must be in school or employed. Social workers are to assist the youth in finding a program and location that suits their needs. As of August 2024, the current capacity of beds available for TAY in Los Angeles County was 408 beds. Most youth share an apartment or house with another NMD in this placement setting.
- **Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP)**  
In SILPs, youth 18-21 are responsible for identifying their own housing and currently receive the foster care "Basic Rate" payment monthly to cover their expenses. The FY 2024-25 monthly rate is \$1,258.19

### Youth with Closed Juvenile Court Cases

All housing options require youth to be homeless or at risk of homelessness.

- **Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus)**  
Youth 18-24 who exited foster care at or after age 18 and who work or attend school full time may receive a placement in a shared apartment. This option is available for 24-36<sup>20</sup> cumulative months, with 180 beds available at the time of this report in Los Angeles County.

<sup>17</sup> AB 2454 Foster youth: nonminor dependents, (Chapter 769, Statutes of 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Rountree, J., Santillano, R., Buenaventura, M., Blackwell, B., Nunn, A. & Vidaurre, A., (2024), Aging Out of Foster Care in Los Angeles: Opportunities to Prevent Homelessness Among Transition-Aged Youth. California Policy Lab.

<sup>19</sup> California Department of Social Services, All County Letter 24-46.

<sup>20</sup> Counties have the option to provide up to 36 months pursuant to SB 1252 (Chapter 774, Statutes of 2014).



- **Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV)**

Youth at least 18 years old and not more than 24 years of age who have left foster care or will leave foster care within 90 days can be provided with 36 months of subsidized housing vouchers and at least 18 months of supportive services to assist them on their path to independence. The federal voucher pays for all or part of an individual's or family's rent. Usually, a voucher holder pays 30% of their income in rent or pays some minimum amount of rent. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers the HCV program in conjunction with local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs). There are two types of vouchers:

- Family Unification Program vouchers, which may be used for special populations such as parenting youth and families, and
- Foster Youth to Independence Initiative (FYI) Vouchers.

As of 2024, 206 total vouchers for FUP/FYI were available in Los Angeles County.<sup>21</sup>

## Youth Perspective on Being in Care and Aging Out of the System

Building on over a decade of data and experience with EFC in California, the Alliance for Children's Rights embarked on a series of conversations and research analysis to better understand the disparities for TAY in care and aging out of the system and to explore potential policy solutions. The Alliance conducted 35 information gathering sessions with youth with lived experience and external community partners. The intent of the conversations was to identify the supports youth exiting the foster care system received, the racial inequities they saw in service program models, potential challenges organizations may have encountered when trying to advance equity efforts across system partners, and recommendations for reforms to address disparities and improve outcomes for transition age youth.

When conducting the information gathering sessions, we explored the following questions:

- **What barriers did transition age youth experience as older youth in foster care?**
- **Were they given concrete supports in areas such as housing, education, mental health, and others, while in care and post-care?**
- **What challenges have they or someone they know experienced when exiting foster care?**
- **What services and supports would best serve transition age youth exiting foster care?**
- **What changes to permanency options should be considered?**

Our conversations honed recommendations to better serve and support transition age youth to achieve their goals while in care and when exiting care.

**"I received more help by word of mouth than through the system."**

— **David G.\***  
Former foster youth

**"How can the system set me up for success?"**

— **Jessica S.**  
Former foster youth

**"I was unable to receive housing assistance because of my mental health status, I felt discriminated against."**

— **Joel W.**  
Former foster youth

\* All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>21</sup> Rountree, J., Santillano, R., Buenaventura, M., Blackwell, B., Nunn, A. & Vidaurre, A., (2024), Aging Out of Foster Care in Los Angeles: Opportunities to Prevent Homelessness Among Transition-Aged Youth, California Policy Lab.

**“I was homeless and was unable to reenter the system to receive services.”**

— **Mina J.**  
Former foster youth

**“I was a baby having a baby in the same system I was left in.”**

— **Tamera C.**  
Former foster youth

These resilient youth envision a system that successfully sets them up for their transition into adulthood and achieving their goals despite the challenges and barriers they face.

# Policy and Practice Reform Recommendations



## 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

**The Problem:** The role of the child welfare workforce is to protect vulnerable youth. Child welfare practitioners engage in complex work investigating reports of abuse and neglect, developing child and family case plans and helping make recommendations to the courts. Social workers also have responsibility for coordinating services such as substance use treatment and mental health support, as well as preventative services that seek to keep families intact and prevent entry into foster care, arranging temporary placements when children must be removed from their homes, and helping facilitate placement with permanent families when biological parents are unable to safely care for their children. There can be an array of factors, including poverty, that heighten a family's chance of visibility by the child welfare system.<sup>22</sup> Systemic biases and oversurveillance of families, especially low-income families, can then lead to unnecessary child welfare involvement.

**Solutions:** Professionals should be aware of biases, understand how they affect decision-making, and understand how those continuing biases can impact the experiences of TAY throughout their time in foster care. A heightened awareness of biases and systems impact and understanding of additional, ongoing cultural humility training for the child welfare workforce can arm the child welfare workforce with the tools to navigate relationships with children, youth and families from communities at greater risk of oversurveillance and overrepresentation in foster care. The training should encompass cultural humility, cultural competency, antiracist practices and historical trauma.

In addition, supporting those with lived experiences, who reflect their communities, in becoming social workers is crucial for creating a more diverse and culturally competent workforce and to aid in meeting recruitment and retention needs. Targeted recruitment and outreach can encompass partnerships with community organizations and local agency leadership to help identify individuals

<sup>22</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, Separating Poverty From Neglect, Child welfare and poverty - Poverty and child welfare - OACAS Library Guides at Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies.

who are interested in pursuing a career in social work. Furthermore, mentorship programs can provide guidance and insight on the social work profession. Educational institutions and resource centers should encourage the creation of support networks that will help create peer support groups for social work students as well as supporting policies that promote recruitment, retention and advancement of social workers with lived experience. The Golden State Social Opportunity Program was created to support youth with lived experience in foster care or homelessness with the ability to enter the field. Funding should be allocated to make the program made permanently available.<sup>23</sup> Leveraging Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and new workforce provider classes under CalAIM,<sup>24</sup> including peer specialist, community health workers, wellness coaches and doulas, could also assist in meeting recruitment and retention goals.

## 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

**The Problem:** Those with lived experience who work in the child welfare system often use their unique perspectives and insights to help them serve children and families. These experts help with enhancing practices and engagement with families, as social workers, mentors, peer supporters, advocates and CASAs. They sometimes experience triggers when working with children, youth, and families of similar background.

**Solution:** Supports could include resilience training that provides coping strategies when dealing with countertransference; mental health supports; trauma informed approaches; peer support training, and self-care training. The training and resources will equip workers with lived experience with the necessary tools and support they need to manage and address relived trauma.

## 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

**The Problem:** Counties may experience challenges in assessing and addressing disproportionality in their systems. Counties may not be utilizing focused applications for that purpose, such as the Disproportionality Diagnostic Tool, a tool created by the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) to enable organizations to understand the underlying issues of disproportionality and the factors that contribute to these disproportionalities.

**Solution:** The Disproportionality Diagnostic Tool “addresses factors that affect disproportionality that are within the agency’s control as well as factors that the child welfare agency does not control but can influence.” It is designed to “properly assess the influences of the community, the structure and culture of the organization, and the cultural competence of the frontline staff as they deliver services (as it) is the most comprehensive and effective way to intervene on behalf of vulnerable children and families.”<sup>25</sup> Counties utilizing such diagnostic tools can better understand and help reform the organizational culture and structures currently in place that continue to produce disparate outcomes.

## 4 Direct the California Department of Social Services, with stakeholder input, to improve data collection related to reports of neglect

**The Problem:** The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) publishes reports on child

<sup>23</sup> AB 178 – Budget Act of 2022, (Chapter 45, Statutes of 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Medi-Cal Transformation, DHCS CalAIM, (n.d.).

<sup>25</sup> Christie, S. (2007), Disproportionality and Disparity. Disproportionality: Developing a Public Agency Strategy.

fatalities, near fatalities, and cases of neglect. County child welfare agencies submit data collected in the Statement of Findings and Information (SOC 826)<sup>26</sup> forms to the CDSS quarterly. However, the current data collection process and reporting of neglect cases are not published promptly.

**Solutions:** The Department should develop newly required data fields to collect quantifiable information about the type of neglect and parental risk factors leading to determinations of substantial risk of harm to the child, and it should publish timely reports to provide transparency. With the adoption of the recommendations of the Mandated Reporting to Community Supporting taskforce in September 2024, CDSS should track changes over time, and ensure that vulnerable youth, such as unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness are able to benefits from the resources and supports provided by the child welfare system when they are victims of abuse or 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"

**The Problem:** Children of color are often treated as more mature than their white counterparts, having to face the stresses of racial biases from a young age. And because of the color of their skin, they are often perceived as more mature by society and forced to take on more responsibility.<sup>27</sup> "The evidence shows that perceptions of the essential nature of children can be affected by race, and for black children, this can mean they lose the protection afforded by assumed childhood innocence well before they become adults."<sup>28</sup>

**Solution:** The Child Welfare Services – California Automated Response and Engagement System (CWS-CARES) is a tool used by social workers to manage cases and support children, youth, and families in the child welfare system. The goal of child abuse and neglect data tracking is to collect, analyze, and interpret data to inform an effective response to child maltreatment. Utilizing CWS-CARES to systematically track the reasons maltreatment reports for youth ages 14-15 and 16-18 are evaluated out would help develop a clearer understanding of why the reports are evaluated out and juvenile cases are not opened for many older youth, preventing them access to the supports and services associated with Extended Foster Care.

##### 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

**The Problem:** In March 2019, the LAO published a report, Older Youth Access to Foster Care,<sup>29</sup> that first reviewed the maltreatment substantiation rates between younger youth and older youth. Although rates were lower for older youth, the gap appeared to be the result of two differences: (1) maltreatment reports for older youth were determined to not require an in-person investigation at higher rates than reports for younger youth, and (2) fewer maltreatment reports for older youth were determined to be substantiated following in-person investigations than for younger youth. Despite

<sup>26</sup> Data and Reports: Fatalities and Near Fatalities Reported to CDSS, California Department of Social Services, (n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> Children of color are treated as more developmentally mature than they actually are, (2020), CSUN professor says, CSUN Today.

<sup>28</sup> Goff, P. A., Jackson, M. C., Di Leone, B. A., Culotta, C. M. & DiTomasso, N. A., (2014), The essence of innocence: consequences of dehumanizing Black children, *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 106(4), 526–545.

<sup>29</sup> Petek, G., (2019), Older Youth Access to Foster Care. LAO.



these differences, older and younger youth have largely equivalent rates of entry into foster care following a maltreatment substantiation.<sup>30</sup>

**Solution:** Collecting data on self-petitions would help counties and the State be better informed regarding the reasons for any differences between older and younger youth with reports for maltreatment.

## 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

**The Problem:** Youth with lived experience reported on their perceived treatment from child welfare practitioners in our focus groups and interviews, including their feelings pertaining to how staff interacted and engaged with them from entry to exit. Many noted they believed the way their social workers or other child welfare staff engaged with them was based on physical/phenotypical characteristics and their socioeconomic status. As well, there was a perception that older youth of color may be perceived as more capable or mature and therefore may not be “evaluated in.” Moreover, although there is no quantitative data to support these assertions, we are aware of data that has been collected regarding challenges social workers have had in managing unconscious biases when working with impacted families.

**Solution:** Collecting data related to maltreatment being self-reported or reported by a third party will allow counties to evaluate how to better engage with children, youth and families and develop best practice strategies to better equip them for this process.

## 8 Monitor outcomes for youth with prior reports of abuse and neglect for safety, permanency, and well being

**The Problem:** Youth with prior reports of abuse and neglect are more vulnerable to disparate outcomes. Therefore, data on the outcomes of prior reports as well as the most recent report for youth with a history of multiple reports may help determine whether certain youth have had more difficulty gaining access to foster care supports over time.

**Solution:** Collecting data related to prior reports of abuse and neglect will allow counties to determine why supports are not reaching youth, what services will best support young people in achieving their goals, evaluate how to better engage with children, youth and families, and develop best practice strategies to better equip them with this process.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

## 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%).<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> Over half of transition age youth in foster care experience homelessness (including couch-surfing) between the ages 17 and 21.<sup>33</sup> 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."<sup>34</sup>

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

**The Problem:** Cross-system collaboration at the state and local level amongst child welfare and other public systems is essential for addressing the complex needs of children, youth and families. Without collaboration, services are not coordinated, and do not reach youth or improve outcomes for transition age youth exiting the foster care system.

<sup>31</sup> Fung, S., Haspel, J., Kniffen, S., McKinney, A. M. & Wondra, D. (2023), Supporting Successful Transitions into Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care: Reforming California's Independent Living Program, Children Now.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Fung et al., (2023).

<sup>34</sup> Rountree, Santillano, et al., (2024).

**Solutions:** Adopting a No Wrong Door approach provides TAY with a universal gateway to services and government programs. Although the individual systems remain intact, the overall mission is blended with a strong focus on youth-centered intervention. The Systems of Care (SOC) model, first developed to support children and youth emotionally at risk or with mental health challenges and their families, can also be implemented at the community level. Systems stay separate, but they adopt a common philosophy across all components and are organized into a coordinated network to support youth.

## 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

The California Child Welfare Council (CWC) was established by the Child Welfare Leadership and Accountability Act of 2006 and serves as an advisory body responsible for improving the collaboration and processes of the multiple agencies and the courts that serve in the child welfare system across California. The Council is co-chaired by the Secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency and the designee of the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, and the membership is comprised of state departments, county department, nonprofit service providers, advocates, parents, and former youth. The Council is charged with monitoring and reporting on the extent to which the agencies and courts are responsive to the needs of children in their joint care.

**The Problem:** To meaningfully connect with youth, systems designed to serve youth must be informed by young people's experience and expertise in those systems. Youth voice in foster care is important for several reasons, including improved outcomes, enhanced service receipt, positive systems change, empowerment, and skill development.

**Solution:** Establishing a CWC TAY Council, comprised of 7-9 current or former foster youth, would involve youth in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, programs and services intended to serve youth. The TAY Council would provide a platform for TAY to offer their insights, influence policies and practices that directly impact their lives, and to improve the outcomes for transition age youth.

## 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

**The Problem:** Foster Family Agencies (FFAs), Short-term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs), and county social workers require enhanced training to better support transition age youth in securing the necessary supports and services for successful transitions.

**Solution:** Training for social workers and other support staff at FFAs, STRTPS and county agencies should encompass a deep understanding of the challenges transition age youth face, which include the risks of unemployment, homelessness, mental health challenges and the lack of support networks after exiting care. They also should be trained specifically on the range of available housing programs for transition age youth, including Transitional Housing Programs (THP), Independent Living Programs (ILP), and housing options for youth exiting care such as the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) voucher program.



#### 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

**The Problem:** Child and Family Teams (CFTs) bring together a group of selected individuals such as caregivers, family members, supportive adults, and service providers who collaborate to support the well-being of children in care. All CFT members need to be equipped with culturally appropriate and trauma informed training to help them better engage with and support families with complex backgrounds in CFT meetings. As well, youth should be prepared and empowered to actively engage in their CFT meetings.

**Solution:** Equipping CFT members with the knowledge and skills needed to address cultural differences and trauma histories can enhance outcomes for children, youth and families. As well, specialized training for youth will assist in their understanding of CFT meetings, their role and responsibility in participating in CFT meetings, receiving information they may wish to have before their CFT meetings, and engaging supportive people of their choosing in their CFT to help in reaching youth and family goals.

#### 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

**The Problem:** An array of services and resources designed to assist youth as they work toward self-sufficiency are available, including state and local benefits and supports. Social workers may not be knowledgeable about all available resources and local providers.

**Solution:** Resources databases must be comprehensive and up to date with all the available options for young people to enable social workers to more effectively connect youth and families with appropriate resources. Enabling an accessible database such as CWS-CARES to provide detailed information regarding all available benefits and services, including emergency childcare, service providers, and housing assistance, social workers will be better equipped to address the complex needs of families which in turn would result in improved outcomes.

#### 6 Ensure expungements and vacatur are initiated prior to exit through records checks (with voluntary consent from youth)

**The Problem:** Youth in foster care often encounter difficulties that result in the accumulation of juvenile records, which can create barriers to employment, housing, and educational opportunities as they transition to adulthood. While some legal mechanisms exist to address record expungement and vacatur, the lack of a consistent process for addressing prior citations for eligible foster youth can leave many at risk of exiting care with unresolved records. Without a coordinated, proactive approach, the collateral consequences of unresolved juvenile or criminal records can prevent youth from achieving a successful transition to independent adulthood.

**Solution:** Child welfare agencies and probation departments must collaborate to develop a voluntary, systematic process for record checks, expungements, and vacatur well before youth near exit from care. This process should include clearly articulated provisions for record sealing and expungement to ensure consenting, eligible youth benefit without unnecessary delays. A designated point person or

team within each agency should oversee these efforts, ensuring timely and thorough implementation. Cross-systems coordination between child welfare, probation, and legal advocates who specialize in record cleaning is crucial to ensuring that youth are supported in addressing both straightforward and more complex cases. Youth should leave the child welfare system with a clean slate and increased opportunities for success.

## 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

**The Problem:** Peer supporters, CASAs, and mentors play a unique role in supporting youth in the foster care system by providing consistent, individualized support. However, engaging with youth and understanding evolving or new programs and services and how to access those resources can be challenging.

**Solution:** Ensuring transition age youth are assigned a peer supporter, CASA, or mentor with specialized training on working with their specific population would improve communication and help to build these relationships. The training should include practical strategies for trauma-informed communication, such as active listening, avoiding re-traumatization, and creating a nurturing environment for discussions as well as 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

**The Problem:** Youth identified challenges accessing services and finding available resources when moving across county lines or when they needed services provided in another county. Many youth reported disruptions in care leading to gaps in services and delays in receiving critical support. Youth should not be discouraged from moving to a new county, particularly if educational or career opportunities are available.

**Solution:** It is imperative to implement warm handoffs from the sending county to the receiving county to maintain stability and support youth during critical transitions. Youth need and deserve consistent and uninterrupted care. Continuity of care means youth receive the same level of support and services regardless of geographic location, without service disruptions.

## 9 Leverage step-down supports including building savings accounts

**The Problem:** An abrupt cessation of services and benefits when youth exit care can exacerbate stressors and send youth into crisis. As youth take on additional financial and other responsibilities, leveraging step-down supports can significantly improve their financial stability.

**Solutions:** Providing step-down supports can help youth pay for other expenses such as security deposits, rent and utilities. Retaining a portion of rent payments in a savings account helps youth to develop the habit of saving and provides a financial safety net when exiting care, for example to be used when buying a car, making a deposit on rental housing, or purchasing books or other materials for education or employment. Additionally, increased awareness of and expansion of the California

Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance and Empowerment (HOPE) Program,<sup>35</sup> could increase access to trust accounts for eligible children who were bereaved by COVID-19 and children who have been in the foster system for over 18 months.

**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**

**The Problem:** 90-day transition plans are intended to focus on activities to assist youth in achieving their goals as they transition out of foster care. The 90-day transition plan should include specific plans for education, employment, housing, mentoring, family connections, continuing support services and health insurance. Developing the 90-day transition plan in close collaboration with youth ensures that their needs, preferences, and goals are addressed. In the information gathering sessions, one youth with lived experience shared that she had no plan in place to continue her medical insurance, her insurance lapsed, and she was unable to attain the medication she needed for her ongoing medical condition. This experience highlights the necessity of thorough and explicit plans, including all vital information and contacts.

**Solution:** The 90-day plan should create a single, comprehensive reference point for each individual youth's arrangements for essentials such as housing, health care, employment, education, transportation, and ongoing resources and connections. It should include ways to navigate health care insurance, finding a healthcare provider, scheduling appointments, and accessing medical and mental health services. The plan should include information regarding designating power of attorney for healthcare decisions and advance healthcare directives and regarding public benefits, including eligibility for and access to all city, county, state, Social Security Administration, or other benefits for which a youth may be eligible. Youth should receive workforce support such as job training, connection to paid internship opportunities or job experience and resume building workshops. The 90-day transition plans should be youth-centered and developed in collaboration with the youth and any support person(s) identified by the 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**

Transitional Independent Living Plans (TILPs) outline the goals, resources and support services needed to help youth achieve self-sufficiency in education, employment, housing, and life skills. Under current law, TILPs must be updated every six months, at times of placement change, in response to extraordinary circumstances, or at the request of the youth.

**The Problem:** Goals and plans evolve as transition age youth achieve certain goals and as they age. Goals setting is premised on the foundation that conscious goals affect action and goals create a focus for development.

**Solution:** It is critical that CDSS and counties systematically collect data on when and why TILPs are updated to ensure these updates are reflective of the evolving needs of the youth; for example, a housing discussion and goal should evolve related to the youth's age and changing housing eligibility

<sup>35</sup> California State Treasurer's Office, (2024), California Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment (HOPE) for Children Trust Account Program: Report Summary.

and need. In addition, TILPs should be updated frequently, utilizing a youth-led process incorporating youth-identified supports to accommodate changes in the youth's goals.

**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)**

The Independent Living Program (ILP) was authorized by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Public Law 106-169).<sup>36</sup> The ILP is intended to provide training, services, and benefits to assist current and former foster youth in achieving self-sufficiency prior to, and after leaving, the foster care system. Each California county has the flexibility to design services to meet a wide range of individual needs and circumstances, and to coordinate services with other federal and state agencies engaged in similar activities.

**The Problem:** Many youth face financial instability and insufficient preparation for independent living while participating in EFC and when they exit care. Without financial literacy training, young people are at higher risk of experiencing unemployment, homelessness, and poverty. Promoting education and training for transition age youth, particularly those aging out of foster care, is critical to helping them achieve their goals. In the information gathering sessions conducted with individuals with lived experience as well as partner organizations, we heard that financial literacy and housing access skills were key areas of focus. Youth need targeted education and support to build the skills necessary for stability as they exit the foster care system.

**Solution:** Updating available training, informed by youth voice, is critical to prepare youth for self-sufficiency. The updated training should be experiential in nature (rather than utilizing a traditional classroom format) and should include budgeting and fiscal management, which includes protecting, understanding and building credit and bank accounts. Developing updated ILP and other training, with input from transition age youth, is vital for the success of youth in foster care to achieve their goals, address their unique needs and foster self-sufficiency and financial stability.

**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**

**The Problem:** Family history and the transition from adolescence to adulthood may result in challenges and changes in the family dynamic and can result in strained relationships with family members such as parents or siblings.

**Solution:** Information, training, and targeted resources can support youth in navigating these complex relationships. By providing tailored support, youth can feel empowered to take active steps to rebuild relationships with family members aligned with their own timelines, boundaries, and goals.

**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**

<sup>36</sup> Public Law 106-169—Dec. 14, 1999, (1999), Congress.



The ILP Annual Narrative Survey Report provides an expansive set of data pertaining to outcomes, challenges, and successes of Independent Living Programs across counties.

**The Problem:** Some counties may excel or face barriers to success in areas such as youth engagement, educational outcomes or housing stability. Success strategies can be shared across counties and would allow for the dissemination of innovative approaches that have been proven to work.

**Solution:** Youth-supporting county systems (i.e., juvenile justice, education, health services) can work more effectively by sharing information and best practices. Utilizing data to develop and share best practices would enhance cross-system collaboration and would help ensure that counties and stakeholders are better equipped to address the needs of transition age youth in foster care by learning from successful initiatives and the ways in which to improve service delivery.

### 15 **Require CDSS to update guidelines for county Independent Living Program best practices to support successful transition to adulthood and consistency across counties**

**The Problem:** There is a lack of consistent, standardized best practices across counties in California regarding ILP, leading to uneven support and outcomes for transition age youth as they move into adulthood. This inconsistency undermines the effectiveness of ILP services and hinders the ability to successfully transition to independent living.

**Solution:** Requiring updates to the ILP guidelines would not only support a successful transition to adulthood for youth in foster care but also provide greater consistency across counties for helping transition age youth navigate the challenges of adulthood. CDSS should establish uniform minimum standards that all counties must follow to reduce inequities and ensuring that all youth in foster care have access to the same quality supports as they transition into adulthood. These guidelines should also incorporate evidence-based practices to ensure that programs are grounded in approaches that have proven to be most effective. These guidelines should be reviewed annually to ensure the improvement process is relevant and effective to meet the changing needs of youth.

### 16 **Provide training, technical assistance and resources/information to Juvenile Court judges to prevent unnecessary exits from Extended Foster Care**

The Juvenile Court is required to review the status of each dependent child (including NMDs) regularly. These Review Hearings are held every six months.

**The Problem:** Youth may voluntarily exit and re-enter Extended Foster Care at any time while they are aged 18-21 but may be involuntarily exited if they are deemed not to be meeting any of the five eligibility criteria, one of which is participating in a program or activity that promotes (or removes barriers towards) employment. Judicial oversight of exits could prevent unmerited exits from Extended Foster Care.

**Solution:** Develop and implement training, technical assistance, and resources for Juvenile Court judges in their oversight role to review exits from Extended Foster Care at review hearings to prevent youth from being exited from the program due to misunderstandings regarding meeting participation criteria.

## 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.<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>37</sup> Tiano, 1 in 4 California foster youth become homeless after leaving care, 2021.

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

**The Problem:** Available beds often fill up quickly for the year and the programs cannot accommodate the number of transition age youth looking for housing. Additional transitional housing is needed in communities that are safe and convenient to education and work opportunities, with a staged transition from more supported to more independent housing.

**Solution:** It is critical that funding and other resources be made available to transitional housing placement providers to expand their capacity and increase suitable housing placements. Counties should prioritize making additional dollars available for adding or expanding contracts with transitional housing placement providers.

**The Problem:** Youth can experience housing instability (e.g., couch surfing) or homelessness as they are waiting for case workers to approve their SILP. Many workers are inundated with high caseloads and are unable to approve SILPs in a timely manner. The implementation of a more streamlined process for SILP placements will help workers approve placements in time to allow youth to seamlessly transition into SILPs without experiencing housing instability or homelessness.

**Solution:** Options for streamlining this process include (1) creating a list of pre-approved SILP locations such as apartment complexes and shared housing arrangements that have already been inspected and approved for use, allowing youth to move into these placements more quickly without needing individual approvals, (2) standardizing the documentation needed for SILP approval, ensuring all information is gathered efficiently, and (3) leveraging technology by developing online portals in CWS-CARES for submission and tracking of SILP approvals. Developing an online portal would allow youth and social workers to submit and track applications in real time increasing transparency and allowing for quicker identification and resolution if any issues arise.

**The Problem:** A significant barrier to stable housing for transition age youth is the many entry requirements and participation criteria programs require. Programs often require youth to complete

various forms and provide proof of meeting eligibility requirements which can delay their ability to enroll in the program. Young people may experience housing instability or homelessness due to the difficulty in acquiring the necessary forms and obtaining required documents. Additionally, technology becomes a barrier if the youth is unsure how to upload documents in a required format or does not have access to hardware or software required.

**Solution:** The California Department of Social Services and housing providers can help remove these barriers to entry and prevent destabilizing exits by relaxing entry requirements and participation criteria in programs.

**The Problem:** Young adults face difficulties when they move between counties and seek to obtain information about housing placements available in their new county of residence. Often a lapse is created while their case is transferred to a social worker in the new county.

**Solution:** The development of streamlined protocols and processes, including housing resources, to assist expeditious and timely cross-county placements and collaboration would help combat this preventable circumstance.

## 2 Promote a true housing continuum for transition age youth by reimagining housing options

**The Problem:** Transitional housing was intended to allow youth to move from more structured supported housing to more independent options. However, the lack of supported transitional housing, including transitional housing with appropriate mental or behavioral health supports, limits participation in more supported housing.

**Solution:** Reimagining the housing continuum and redesigning programs to meet the needs of young adults could reduce the reliance on SILPs and better support youth transitions.

## 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

TILPs are intended to be forward looking and created collaboratively at a meeting with a social worker. California law requires that every youth in out-of-home care participate in developing a TILP beginning at age 16. Social workers are required to have an in-person meeting with the young person every six months to update the TILP. Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services policy is that youth in foster care participate in developing a TILP starting at age 14.

**The Problem:** The goal of transition age services is to provide supportive resources to help young adults transition into independent adulthood successfully. Currently, most youth experience a sharp decline in services when they exit or age out of foster care that leaves them without housing.

**Solution:** To combat this experience, it is essential that youth develop long-term housing plans with their social workers that support them throughout their transition when exiting care. A housing continuum timeline should be developed and incorporated into the TILP to successfully help transition age youth maintain stable housing in and out of care. The TILP should include housing options at each stage from age 14-21 and include options, from more supported housing to more independent options, for the youth to pursue once they exit care. All TILPs should include a request for an FYI



voucher 90 days prior to exit, unless the youth chooses to opt out. Information about how to apply for each housing option, deadlines to apply, and what information is required from the youth should be included in the plan. It also should include skills-building activities to help youth develop housing literacy (e.g., the knowledge and skills to locate and apply for housing so they can adequately prepare to locate, apply for, and transition into more independent housing options) and life skills necessary to maintain housing (e.g., understanding tenancy rights, responsibilities as a renter, and navigating roommate conflicts).

#### 4 Maximize access to and use of FYI housing vouchers

Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers provide dedicated rental assistance to support youth in two situations: youth exiting foster care who are at risk of homelessness, and youth who have become homeless (or at risk of homelessness) after having been in foster care. The FYI program was created in 2019 by current and former foster youth advocates who wanted to ensure that young people would have a resource to help them avoid homelessness.

**The Problem:** Youth exiting foster care may experience housing instability and homelessness as a result of the competitive rental market and their lack of rental history. As well, landlords may be unfamiliar with FYI vouchers or reluctant to participate in the program.

**Solution:** Counties should leverage Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood and Housing Navigation and Maintenance funding; build relationships with community landlords and establish strong working relationships between the county child welfare agencies, public housing authorities and community-based organizations to maximize access to and use of FYI 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

California's Family Urgent Response System (FURS) was launched in 2019 to provide 24/7 support to children and youth currently or formerly in foster care and their caregivers. Youth are connected to a FURS counselor who will listen and work to connect youth to local resources and help alleviate the challenges.

**The Problem:** Transition age youth experience housing instability while they are in or eligible for Extended Foster Care, that can result in them experiencing homelessness as they attempt to secure new housing or are placed on a lengthy waitlist for the next placement.

**Solution:** The Family Urgent Response System can be utilized to help transition age youth access emergency housing options available in their county. Developing a continually updated directory with community-level resources can be used by FURS staff to help TAY access housing placements in an emergency. A FURS counselor follows up with the youth a day after the call to see if the young person needs additional support. This follow-up call presents an additional opportunity for the FURS staff to provide a warm handoff to county resources so the youth can obtain a more permanent long-term housing solution.

For youth formerly in care, the FURS counselor should discuss the option of re-entry into Extended Foster Care for eligible youth. The FURS worker should connect youth to county services to streamline re-entry if youth are interested.

## 6 Ensure counties provide on demand access to housing and other supportive services

**The Problem:** Transition age youth may experience destabilizing events or other challenges both during business hours and after hours.

**Solution:** Ensuring “on demand” availability of supportive services, including housing resources and mental health support, can prevent delays in access to necessary services. As timely support can mitigate existing challenges and reduce risk of homelessness, promoting the availability of all hours access to FURS to youth is one component of a larger strategy to ensure youth are supported in times of critical need.

## 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

**The Problem:** Transition age youth shared experiences of bias and discrimination during the housing process. Many felt their race and appearance affected their access to and placement in housing.

**Solutions:** Those involved in the housing procurement process, including housing navigators, housing providers and other systems representatives, should be trained in best practices that mitigate discriminatory practices when distributing housing vouchers and determining eligibility for housing programs.

Partnership with the California Interagency Council on Homelessness Youth and Young Adult Working Group and Continuums of Care can support the development of best practices for housing navigators and other strategies to prevent youth and young adult homelessness.

## 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.<sup>38</sup> The Department is evaluating the pilots. Local jurisdictions have also created GI programs, like Los Angeles County's Breathe program.<sup>39</sup> These pilots have shown significant, positive results for participants.<sup>40</sup> 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**

**The Problem:** Youth exiting extended foster care and expectant and parenting youth in foster care often struggle to pay their bills and provide for their families.

**Solution:** Guaranteed Income programs can help alleviate financial insecurity for these populations. State and local programs should use evaluation outcomes from existing pilots to refine, expand, and fund ongoing Guaranteed Income programs specifically 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> Food insecurity is also detrimental to mental health, as the stress of not knowing where the next meal will come from can

<sup>38</sup> Guaranteed Income Pilot Program, California Department of Social Services.

<sup>39</sup> Breathe: LA County's guaranteed income program, (2024), Los Angeles County.

<sup>40</sup> Kim, B.-K. E., Castro, A., West, S., Tandon, N., Ho, L., Nguyen, V. T. & Sharif, K., (2024), The American Guaranteed Income Studies: City of Los Angeles Big: Leap.

<sup>41</sup> Nargi, (2022), A new approach to keep former foster youth from facing food insecurity.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (2024), Food Accessibility, Insecurity and Health Outcomes. National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities.

contribute to anxiety or depression.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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**

**The Problem:** Despite the safety net offered through extended foster care, many nonminor dependents still struggle to meet their basic needs. A longitudinal study of extended foster care<sup>45</sup> found that over 30 percent of youth still in foster care are classified as "food insecure." One in four youth reported having to get food or borrow money for food from a friend or relative, and one in five reported skipping or cutting meals because they could not afford food. Nearly one in five reported having to choose between paying a bill or purchasing food. One in ten reported not eating for an entire day because they could not afford to buy food.

**Solution:** A food assistance program would ensure NMDs have access to the maximum CalFresh benefit, regardless of if they meet the income or work eligibility requirements. Legislation would ensure that youth in foster care receiving direct payments for room and board are not excluded from receiving nutrition benefits due to their SILP payment counting toward the CalFresh income requirement.

<sup>43</sup> Hartline-Grafton, H., (2013), SNAP and public health: The role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in improving the health and well-being of Americans, Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center.

<sup>44</sup> Nargi, (2022), A new approach to keep former foster youth from facing food insecurity.

<sup>45</sup> Courtney, ME, Charles, P., Okpych, NJ, Napolitano, L., Halsted, K., Courtney ME et al. (2014), Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of foster youth at age 17.



## 2 Incorporate food education into Independent Living Program and other life skills courses

**The Problem:** Youth in foster care often lack basic food education, including knowledge of nutrition, meal planning, and cooking skills and often feel ill-equipped to grocery shop and prepare meals once they exit care, relying on fast foods for meals.<sup>46</sup> These life skills are essential for maintaining health as youth transition to adulthood.

**Solution:** Courses should teach youth in care how to shop while balancing a monthly food budget, as well as low-cost recipes that will help them learn healthy cooking skills and eating habits. Life skills courses will help youth learn how to use the funds best to support their health and well-being through healthy food choices when they begin receiving SNAP benefits.

### 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.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, in school districts across the state of California, statistics on youth in care paint a bleak picture:<sup>48</sup>

- Approximately 64% of youth in care in California graduate from high school (compared to 86% of students overall).
- 13% of California youth in foster care who graduated high school were deemed prepared for college or a career, as compared to 44% statewide.
- 34% of foster youth between the ages of 17 and 18 have experienced five or more school changes.
- Over 14% of California foster youth have been suspended at least once, compared to 3% statewide.
- Nationally, Black girls are suspended more than five times as often as white girls, and Black girls are 2.7 times more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system than their white peers.<sup>49</sup>
- Foster youth between the ages of 17 and 18 are twice as likely as their peers not in foster care to have served an out-of-school suspension at some point.
- Foster youth who later enroll in community college typically have a lower GPA and earn fewer credits in their first year compared to their peers.
- Compared to their peers, foster youth are less likely to attend a four-year college or university and are less likely to complete their first year when enrolled.

<sup>46</sup> Barakat, N. (2011), Healthy Nutrition for Children in Foster Care. American Bar Association.

<sup>47</sup> Alternative Family Services, (2022), Foster Youth Education in California: What you need to know.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Epstein, R., Blake, J. J., & González, T., (2017), Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood.

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**

CalKIDS<sup>50</sup> is a children's savings account program supporting college education and career training administered by the ScholarShare Investment Board, an agency of the State of California. Every eligible, low-income, public school student in grades 1-12 has a CalKIDS account created in their name with an initial deposit of \$500. Eligible students identified as foster youth receive an additional one-time \$500 deposit. Enrollment is automatic for eligible newborns and students.

**The Problem:** Parents or students need to register online to claim funds in their CalKIDS account. Many youth in foster care and the juvenile justice system are unaware of or unable to access their CalKIDS accounts, a resource for supporting their educational and financial futures.

**Solution:** Social workers, probation officers, Educational Rights Holders, and caregivers should be made aware of this resource and work collaboratively with youth to understand and access their CalKIDS account to support their college education and career training.

### **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**

Foster Youth Education Liaisons ensure and facilitate the proper educational placement, enrollment in school, and transfer between schools for youth in foster care.

**The Problem:** Youth in foster care have lower graduation rates than their peers. In the 2022-2023 school year, 61.2% of foster youth in California graduated from high school compared to 86.5% of their peers not in foster care.<sup>51</sup> The consequences of placement instability, including lost credits that students have earned, lack of appropriate academic planning and supports, lack of continuity in learning, mentorship, and social connections, and failures to protect students' rights to remain in their school when their placements change, all can impede progress toward graduation. Transition age youth report they would benefit from targeted counseling as early as middle school to identify

<sup>50</sup> CalKIDS.

<sup>51</sup> Foster Youth in California Schools, (2024), California Department of Education.

post-secondary education pathways and eligibility requirements for high school graduation as well as higher education.

**Solution:** Middle school and high school counselors and Foster Youth Education Liaisons should prioritize supporting youth to improve positive educational outcomes by assisting youth with 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**

Parents or legal guardians usually hold educational rights for their children. For minors under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court, the judge may decide to temporarily or permanently remove the right of a parent or legal guardian to make educational decisions and give that right to another adult. This can apply to a child who is supervised by child welfare services or a youth who is on probation. A court-appointed Educational Rights Holder is responsible for protecting the child's rights and interests with respect to educational or developmental services, including any special education and related services.

**The Problem:** School instability can profoundly impact students' educational progress and lead to gaps in learning and development.

**Solution:** Educational Rights Holders and other supportive adults can support youth as early as middle school in developing educational goals and understanding education and graduation rights and support services available to youth in foster care in high school and higher education.

**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**

**The Problem:** Youth in foster care under the age of eighteen must have an Educational Rights Holder to make decisions in their best interest, while youth aged eighteen and older have the right to make their own education decisions. However, in some cases, the identity or status of the Educational Rights Holder is unclear, which can hinder educational progress and access to necessary assessments and supports.

**Solution:** Juvenile Courts should be encouraged to continue oversight of educational progress and confirm the status of the youth's Educational Rights Holder through minute orders. This practice would enhance transparency, ensure the identification of the appropriate educational decision-maker, and help facilitate access to wraparound services that promote educational stability and achievement.

## 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.

### Key Findings:<sup>52</sup>

- Youth in foster care at ages 17–18 have a 60% chance of having a lifetime behavioral health challenge and have twice the normative rate of depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- At age 17, 68 % of youth in foster care have behavioral health needs, and more than a third have depression or substance dependence; yet only half of these youth receive services.

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

**The Problem:** Some transition age youth require specialized behavioral health services due to their unique experiences with trauma, instability, and grief due to loss.

**Solution:** Increasing individualized support, streamlining referrals, and improving coordination with behavioral health services through the Managed Care Plans can address complex needs and ensure timely treatment and interventions.

**The Problem:** Managed Care Plans offer Child Welfare Liaisons to assist youth in navigating the healthcare system, including securing behavioral health services. However, these Liaisons' effectiveness in ensuring timely access to behavioral health services varies and proactive intervention is necessary to meet the needs of transition age youth.

<sup>52</sup> Blakeslee, JE, Kothari, BH, Miller, RA, (2023). Intervention development to improve foster youth mental health by targeting coping self-efficacy and help-seeking. Child Youth Serv Rev.



**Solution:** Managed Care Plan Child Welfare Liaisons can play an active role in assisting with coordination between Managed Care Plans and Mental Health Plans.

## 2 Ensure youth are timely and appropriately referred for Specialty Mental Health Services

**The Problem:** Because all youth in foster care are categorically eligible for Specialty Mental Health Services (SMHS) they do not need to be screened before being referred for assessment.

**Solution:** All social workers, public health nurses, or others working with TAY should be knowledgeable about categorical eligibility and should refer TAY to SMHS assessment as needed.

## 3 Ensure implementation of the Behavioral Health Services Act modernization fully accounts for needs of current and former foster youth

**The Problem:** The Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) was passed as Proposition 63 in 2004, and then modernized by Proposition 1 in 2024 as the Behavioral Health Services Act (BHSA). The Act is intended to provide funding for behavioral health services across the state and could be used to meet gaps in services faced by youth in foster care. The modernization of the BHSA provides an opportunity to better meet the needs of transition age youth by ensuring coordination across systems.

**Solution:** The needs of current and former foster youth should be reflected and fully integrated into the BHSA implementation framework. Programs should be created dedicated to the unique challenges faced by transition age youth. One youth with lived experience noted the difficulties in finding behavioral health services due to lack of support from their social worker. Another noted they had to convince their relative caregiver that they needed to have a mental health assessment.

## 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

**The Problem:** Culturally relevant behavioral health providers and peer supporters are critical because they bring an understanding of the unique challenges of transition age youth, allowing them to offer care that resonates with their lived experiences. Peer supporters are increasingly used by mental health programs to engage transition age youth living with serious mental illness.<sup>53</sup> A study conducted on transition age youth's mental health experiences reflected relational and interpersonal factors significantly influenced their engagement in mental health services.<sup>54</sup> However, continuity of care in addition to culturally and trauma-informed support is considered essential to effective treatment. According to an article in *The Lancet*,<sup>55</sup> "Several aspects of disrupted continuity of care might explain poorer outcomes for patients concerned: recounting one's medical history multiple times is stressful and frustrating for anyone, but probably more so for people with mental disorders that might have roots in traumatic life events; the episodic nature of psychosis and relapse and remission associated with major depression or bipolar disorder make it important for the psychiatrist to see the patient in different phases of their disorder."

**Solutions:** Culturally relevant behavioral health providers and peer supporters can validate and honor their cultural identity, creating a safe space for the young person to feel seen, heard, and

<sup>53</sup> Hiller-Venegas, S., Gilmer, T.P., Jones, N. et al, (2022), Clients' Perspectives Regarding Peer Support Providers' Roles and Support for Client Access to and Use of Publicly Funded Mental Health Programs Serving Transition-Age Youth in Two Southern California Counties.

<sup>54</sup> McCormick, KA, Chatham, A., Klodnick, VV, Schoenfeld, EA, Cohen, DA, (2022), Mental Health Service Experiences Among Transition-Age Youth: Interpersonal Continuums that Influence Engagement in Care.

<sup>55</sup> *The Lancet Psychiatry* (2011), Continuing of care: the road goes ever on.

understood. This culturally attuned approach fosters trust and engagement, which are essential for effective behavioral health treatments. It is also vital that behavioral health providers and peer supporters operate from a trauma-informed perspective. This means they should be trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, resist re-traumatization, and respond to the youth's need with sympathy and compassion. Ensuring youth have access to behavioral health providers and peer supporters that are reflective of their culture and community assists in developing positive therapeutic relationships. And finding the right match is key to setting up a good relationship and getting the most out of treatment.

## 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

**The Problem:** As noted in a National Youth Law Center report,<sup>56</sup> "... Another issue for foster youth is identity development. In a small study of adolescent foster youth, Susan M. Kools, a professor of adolescent development and mental health at UCSF, conducted intensive interviews with the youth to determine their perceptions of their time in foster care.<sup>57</sup> She found that foster care had a negative impact on identity development.<sup>58</sup> The youth felt judged by both the adults and peers in their life because of their status as foster youth.<sup>59</sup> For adolescents, peer perceptions are critically important. Kools found that being teased and ridiculed about being in foster care was particularly damaging to foster youth in their identity development,<sup>60</sup> which resulted in them feeling disconnected and alienated from their peers."<sup>61</sup>

**Solutions:** Involvement in alternative therapies and strengths building activities can be a transformative experience for youth in foster care. Alternative therapies, like equine therapy and music therapy, can be more engaging than traditional therapies, like talk therapy. Strengths building activities (e.g., sports activities, nature activities, cultural activities, etc.) give youth the chance to meet new friends, coaches and mentors while developing and exploring new skills and interests. Research shows that involvement in extracurricular activities can also help improve a student's attendance, behavior and course completion at school.

Continuing to build on the proposed investment in alternative therapies, through immediate needs funding and strengths building envisioned in the Permanent Foster Care Rate Structure,<sup>62</sup> can promote alternative therapies and strength-building activities that are accessible and interesting to youth. As well, providing training to Medi-Cal providers on how to include alternative therapies in their mental health plans will promote access and availability.

## 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

**The Problem:** Often young people face significant barriers to accessing behavioral health services due to stigmas surrounding behavioral health and fear based on cultural perceptions. In many cases, youth have reported that behavioral health services are viewed as a form of punishment when

<sup>56</sup> Klitsch, S. (2011), Beyond the basics: How extracurricular activities can benefit foster youth. National Center for Youth Law.

<sup>57</sup> Kools, S.M. (1997), Adolescent Identity Development in Foster Care. Family Relations, 46, 263.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid at 266.

<sup>59</sup> Kools, S.M. (1997), 46, 263.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid at 266-267.

<sup>61</sup> Kools, S.M. (1997), at 267.

<sup>62</sup> Assembly Bill 16 - Human Services Omnibus (Chapter 46, Statutes of 2024).

someone other than themselves initiate a mental health request, particularly within certain cultural contexts where mental health is highly stigmatized.

**Solution:** Encouraging investments in community education for and with both youth and providers can help increase mental health awareness and the benefits of seeking mental health support. This strategy can help to reduce barriers for youth accessing services and empower youth to seek the help they need without fear of stigma 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.”<sup>63</sup>

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

**The Problem:** While permanency options are being identified, the lack of even temporary solutions results in many youth experiencing homelessness without familial support or connection to a supportive adult. Almost all the youth who participated in the Alliance information-gathering sessions said they wish they had more supportive adults to help them navigate this process. Many shared that the lack of involvement in the planning process resulted in challenges such as involvement with law enforcement, unemployment, and being unhoused.

**Solution:** Continuing to identify permanency options, incorporating reconnection with family members, as age and developmentally appropriate, for transition age youth and involving them in

<sup>63</sup> Alameda County Social Services Agency, (2018). A Guide to Permanency Options for Youth, Revised 2018.



the process helps them achieve more stability and may provide additional housing opportunities. Authentic engagement can support transition age youth through continued family finding, and CFT meetings provide an opportunity to support youth with family-centered identification of relatives and fictive kin. Extended permanency options could include supporting building a relationship with family, including parents, siblings, and other extended family members with whom the youth has not previously been connected.

Existing and new Family Finding and Engagement funding can support developing relational permanency with relatives and extended family members. Technical assistance can be provided through the Center for Excellence in Family Finding Engagement and Support.<sup>64</sup>

## 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

**The Problem:** AB 2454, signed into law in 2014, allows former foster youth whose guardian or adoptive parent is no longer providing them with support to re-enter foster care. This bill's intent was to remove disincentives to permanency for youth who would otherwise be eligible for Extended Foster Care by providing safeguards against failed legal permanency when a youth is between 18 and 21. However, AB 2454 excludes some former foster youth and creates unintentional barriers to re-entry. Legislation amending WIC 388.1 could ensure that all former foster youth are afforded the right to re-enter care if their permanent relationship is disrupted without having to overcome administrative barriers to re-entry.

AB 2454 is only intended to allow re-entry for youth no longer supported by their former guardian or adoptive parent. However, in some instances, the former guardian or adoptive parent can still be receiving funding on behalf of the youth even though they are no longer using this funding to support the youth. AB 2454 requires this funding to be terminated before a young person can petition the court for re-entry. Many youth who are no longer supported by their guardian or adoptive parent do not know if their guardian or adoptive parent is continuing to receive funding or the funding was terminated and are not able to ascertain this information.

**Solution:** Amend WIC section 388.1 to remove the barrier that requires the termination of funding before a youth can petition the court to re-enter foster care. This will ensure that youth can challenge a guardian's or adoptive parent's receipt of benefits and are not left without support when their permanent relationship with a guardian or adoptive parent is disrupted.

<sup>64</sup> The Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement and Support, California Department of Social Services, (n.d.).

## 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.”<sup>65</sup> 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

**The Problem:** Family First Prevention Services (FFPS) Program Block Grant funding supports primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and intervention strategies and services that support the ability of parents and families to provide safe, stable, and nurturing environments for their children. Interventions and strategies must include culturally appropriate and responsive services that are tailored to meet the needs of local families who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system including Indian and Alaskan Native families, families of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/plus, children or youth. Expectant and Parenting Youth (EPY) are categorically eligible for Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and do not need to meet candidacy requirements to be eligible for services. Implementation of FFPS Block Grant funding is building and capacity has increased, however, additional capacity and prioritization could further support youth well-being.

**Solution:** Continue to build capacity and prioritize utilization of FFPS prevention and intervention strategies to support youth well-being.

**The Problem:** Expectant and Parenting Youth Conferences are voluntary conferences focusing on the youth parent’s personal needs and the needs of their baby. The youth parent’s social worker, a facilitator from the child welfare agency, and an advocate knowledgeable about resources should attend the conference, along with any other supporters the youth would like to invite (e.g. the baby’s other parent, friends, etc.). EPY Conferences build trust and are effective, but require data to qualify for FFPSA funding.

**Solution:** Funding and supporting research on EPY Conferences to support inclusion of EPY

<sup>65</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, (2022), Child welfare and foster care statistics.

Conferences in the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse would enable the ability to leverage FFPSA funding to build capacity and implement EPY Conferences across the state.

## 2 Implement strategies to ensure expectant parents are connected to home visiting programs

**The Problem:** Home visiting programs provide in-home support and education to expectant and new parents. Home visiting programs, which are backed by decades of research into their efficacy, can provide the necessary guidance and resources to expectant and parenting youth so they can provide stable and nurturing homes for their children. A number of home visiting programs are included in the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse Home visiting programs which allows access to FFPSA funding for these programs. However, counties do not consistently prioritize eligible home visiting programs in their county FFPSA prevention plans.

**Solution:** Implement strategies to ensure expectant parents are expeditiously connected to home visiting programs and ensure available resources, including FFPSA prevention services funding is leveraged by counties.

## 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

**The Problem:** Two of the most pressing issues expectant and parenting youth have noted are securing reliable childcare and access to transportation. Securing childcare and transportation are essential for young parents to be able to continue their education, seek employment and access vital resources. These youth face unique challenges and counties should prioritize tailored services that support the family structure.

**Solution:** Eliminate barriers that prevent maximizing use of the Emergency Child Care Bridge funding and prevent the use of license-exempt child care providers which unnecessarily restricts access to the Emergency Child Care Bridge and does not reflect the parent choice principle.

## 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)

**The Problem:** Expectant and parenting youth in care have unique needs related to their physical, emotional, social, and financial health that require individualized support. Because of their involvement with child welfare and their age, they also often face oversurveillance and scrutiny that other parents do not experience.<sup>66</sup>

**Solution:** A specialized expectant parenting plan integrated in the TILP or produced as a standalone document should include the ways in which the youth will be supported in their parenting, including accessing specific EPY supports (e.g., Expectant Parent Payments and Infant Supplement payments), childcare, health and reproductive care, and other parenting supports including home visiting. The plan should be voluntary and youth-led, with a team including representatives from partner agencies (such as Managed Care Plans, Public Health, and community-based organizations) that support the implementation of the plan. These plans should be developed in collaboration with supportive adults at the invitation of the youth and should include information related to all relevant resources

<sup>66</sup> Expectant and Parenting Youth in Child Welfare, Child Welfare Information Gateway, (n.d.).

including Managed Health Care Plans, WIC, transportation, child care, education, reproductive health, tax benefits and filing, and transition plans to assist with accessing CalWORKs, CalFresh, and other public benefits when exiting care. Plans should be developed within 1-2 months of pregnancy and reviewed every 4-6 months until the youth exits care. This plan would help ensure that EPY receive comprehensive supports addressing the unique needs of expectant and parenting youth.

## 5 Develop and implement specialized Expectant and Parenting Youth training to support social workers

**The Problem:** Social workers in California often lack specialized training to effectively address the unique needs of expectant and parenting youth in the child welfare system. Without proper guidance and resources, social workers may struggle to provide appropriate support and services that meet the complex needs of these young parents, resulting in inadequate care and potentially poor outcomes for both the youth and their children.

**Solution:** Training should include up to date and relevant information and state and local resources to support expectant and parenting youth, including Expectant Parent Payments and Infant Supplement payments, childcare, health and reproductive care and other parenting supports (such as home visiting and supplies for birthing and parenting), Managed Health Care Plans, WIC, transportation, education, employment and career development, tax benefits and filing, and other public benefits to assist with access when exiting care.



## 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.

A case study of 12 counties in California documented the scope of CSE maltreatment:<sup>67</sup>

- Between 2015 and 2021, in counties that had opted in, 70,334 reports were made alleging concerns of CSE.
- Between July 2015, and December 2021, 38,168 minors had concerns of commercial sexual exploitation documented by child welfare agencies.
- Roughly one in four youth had confirmed CSE victimization documented.
- About 14% were in child welfare cases when concerns of CSE were first documented, and an additional 15% had a case opening within 12 months.
- About 12% were in foster care and an additional 10% entered foster care within 12 months of the initial CSE concern.

**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**

**The Problem:** Youth victimized by CSE deserve and require safe, appropriate, and available emergency and transitional housing. In some instances, youth are referred to housing options that leave them

<sup>67</sup> Hammond, I., Wiegmann, W., Magruder, J., Webster, D., Lery, B. et al, (2023), Evaluating California's Efforts to Address the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Urban Institute & University of California, Berkeley, California Child Welfare Indicators Project.

vulnerable to ongoing exploitation. Additionally, there is a lack of programs and housing options available for youth victimized by CSE. Youth victimized by CSE tend to run away from placements more frequently, and more robust and service rich programs are needed to support these youth. Youth homelessness prevention centers, where available, are often locations that youth who have run away from care turn to in need and can be safe outlets for youth.

**Solutions:** Ensure timely access to appropriate housing options promoting physical safety and mental health. As well, better coordination of services and system response is needed to support youth who are victims of CSE. One strategy is to leverage opportunities to engage the California Child Welfare Council Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Action Team on recommendations.

## 2 Update CWS-CARES system capacity to collect data to enhance counties' supports and engagement to better support youth victimized by commercial sexual exploitation

**The Problem:** Youth in foster care are at heightened risk for commercial sexual exploitation.<sup>68</sup>

**Solution:** Targeted timely and accurate data collection can help identify youth most at risk of CSE or who have already been victimized. Data collection involves gathering information on demographics, risk factors (i.e., history of running away, prior trauma, involvement in the juvenile justice system) and any indicators of exploitation. This data should be collected at entry and updated regularly to reflect any changes in the youth's circumstances. Furthermore, by collecting detailed data, counties can better allocate resources where they are most needed. For instance, if data shows a high prevalence of CSE in a particular area, targeted interventions, specialized training for resource parents and relative caregivers and additional support services can be directed to that need. Cross county data sharing can reduce the likelihood of information gaps and ensures that youth continue to receive appropriate support regardless of their geographic location.

## 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

**The Problem:** Current law requires that a county opting into the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) program to form a multidisciplinary team (MDT) to "coordinate case management, case planning, and services for [CSEC]."<sup>69</sup>

**Solution:** Based on promising practices, it is suggested that counties form an individualized MDT for each identified youth that is strengths-based and prioritizes the youth's voice in the decision-making process. The members of the MDT work together to develop a safety plan. Youth should be given the option to participate. Safety plans and/or case plans should be developed and implemented including specialized services and training that include 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

**The Problem:** Youth in the child welfare system are at heightened risk of labor trafficking and other forms of exploitation and current policies and practices have not adequately addressed or prevented

<sup>68</sup> Human Rights Project for Girls, Rights4Girls, (n.d.).

<sup>69</sup> California Welfare & Institutions Code Section 16524.8.

these vulnerabilities. There is a lack of comprehensive review and data addressing the intersection between labor trafficking and child welfare, informed by the lived experience of affected youth.

**Solution:** The California Child Welfare Council is encouraged to prioritize a review of the intersection of labor trafficking and other exploitation and the child welfare system and youth in foster care. As data is limited for this population, standardized data collection measures must be implemented across counties to provide consistent metrics, thus holding counties more accountable for outcomes related to CSE. The insight of youth who have experienced foster care and trafficking is also critical to adopting meaningful policies and practices. Policy reforms should be informed by data and reflective of youth's lived experience, to ensure policies and practices meet the young people's needs.

# CONCLUSION

The continued focus on addressing racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system is commendable and achievable. Since the establishment of Extended Foster Care in 2012, issues such as transitional outcomes and long-term disparities have been at the forefront of child welfare research. The recommendations outlined in this report reflect policy and practice changes that are a part of the continuous improvement process to help streamline support and services to transition age youth. A balanced approach, that acknowledges the complexities of young peoples' experiences, is needed to help youth transition from foster care to adulthood and achieve their goals. Conversations pertaining to transition age youth should be informed by their voices, an understanding of the various systemic and structural factors that impact their lives and a commitment to advocating for policies and practices that support their successful transition to adulthood.

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All policy changes related to transition age youth must reflect the needs of this population by empowering youth voice. These changes should address systemic gaps, promote equity and ensure that policies are responsive to the real needs of these young people.

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