

# **Transitions**

Building Better Lives For  
Youth Leaving Foster Care

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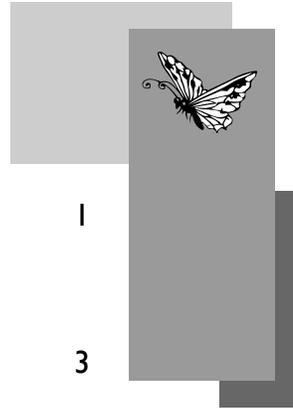
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# Contents



Introduction	1
Arizona's Foster Care System and the Transition to Independence	3
Methodology	5
Findings	10
Recommendations	18



# Introduction

Approximately 350 Arizona youth will leave foster care to live on their own this year. In comparison to their peers, youth transitioning out of foster care are at greater risk of low educational attainment, homelessness, non-marital childbearing, joblessness, poverty, physical and mental illness, and engaging in or being victims of crimes. For example, a 1991 national study of youth in foster care who had been out of the system for 2.5 to 4 years found that 46 percent had not finished high school, 51 percent were unemployed, and 42 percent had given birth or fathered a child.<sup>1</sup> A 2001 study reported that three in ten of the nation's homeless adults are former foster children.<sup>2</sup>

There are several reasons why these youth are at greater risk for such serious problems in early adulthood. National research indicates that they may not have learned the life skills necessary to handle adult tasks and few have a family support network to fall back on. While changes in federal and state laws have opened up opportunities for older youth in the foster care system, many of these youth aging out of foster care and becoming independent are still unaware that they might be eligible to receive additional assistance or how to secure that assistance.

Unfortunately, little is known about the impact of the services provided to Arizona youth in, or who have “aged-out” of, foster care as they prepare for and transition to adulthood and living independently. To ensure that these young people receive appropriate, timely and adequate life skills training and that services are in place to help them successfully make the transition to becoming self-sufficient, more must be learned about the impact of the services received and what services were needed, but not available.

To that end, in the spring of 2002, Children's Action Alliance and Casey Family Programs, Tucson Division, in coordination with the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) and several community-based providers, held focus groups and interviews with young adults across the state. These discussions allowed young people to describe the challenges they face, the programs and supports they found most beneficial while in foster care, the challenges they faced once they left care, and the resources they continue to need to be successful.

This report describes the methodology used to collect information on youth transitioning from foster care to independence, identifies key project findings, and makes policy and program recommendations.

# **The Federal - State Role in Supporting Transitions to Independence**



The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) is the state agency responsible for abused, neglected and abandoned children who enter foster care. In 1983, the Arizona Young Adult Program (AYAP) was initiated within DES and began to offer services in Phoenix and Tucson. AYAP began with a federal demonstration grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The program served older youth and helped prepare them to transition out of foster care at age 18 or when they received their high school diploma or GED. AYAP was originally designed to secure specialized services for youth to help in this transition to independence and to help youth develop individualized plans to reach this goal successfully.

In 1986, DHHS implemented the Federal Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative which allowed all qualifying states to receive some federal dollars and program direction to establish independent living services for youth age 16 and older in foster care. By 1999, Arizona was receiving approximately \$350,000 in annual federal funding to provide services statewide to eligible youth.

Recognizing much more needed to be done to help youth transitioning out of foster care, Congress passed the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169). This legislation:

- Doubled federal funding for the Independent Living Program.
- Requires states to use some portion of their funds for assistance and services for older youth who have left foster care but have not reached age 21.
- Allows states to use up to 30 percent of their Independent Living Program funds for room and board for youth between the ages of 18 to 21 transitioning out of foster care.
- And, allows states to extend Medicaid to 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds who have been emancipated from foster care.

In 2000, the Arizona legislature passed H.B. 2400 (Chapter 116, Laws of 2000), which authorizes the state to provide voluntary services to youth between the ages of 18 and 21, and establishes Medicaid/AHCCCS eligibility for certain youth transitioning out of foster care.

In Federal Fiscal Year 2003, Arizona received more than \$1.5 million dollars from the federal government to support independent living services.



# Arizona's Foster Care System and the Transition to Independence

Children and youth enter the Arizona child welfare system because of parental abuse, neglect or abandonment. The primary goals of the child welfare system are to reunite the family or place each child in an alternative permanent home (for example, in an adoptive home or in a guardianship relationship). However, many children end up in long-term foster care arrangements — neither being reunited with their family nor being adopted. This is particularly common for teens in the child welfare system.

When youth turn 18, they may “age out” of the foster care system and can leave the care of the state, or they may choose to stay in foster care voluntarily and receive services that complement the youth's own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency.

DES policy currently provides that, starting no later than age 16, youth who are not on track to be adopted or placed in a guardianship arrangement must be assisted to be prepared to live independently. This includes services and supports to enhance the youth's emotional readiness for adulthood, success in education, job and career, daily living skills, understanding of their legal rights and responsibilities, and use of community programs and systems. Unless other permanent plans are established (e.g., return home, adoption or guardianship), youth in foster care must remain in the custody of DES and under the authority of the juvenile court until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.



In Maricopa and Pima counties, there are **Arizona Young Adult Program (AYAP)** case management units with staff specializing in services to this population of youth. In other areas of the state, case managers are generalists and usually handle all types of cases — from CPS investigations to adoptions and youth aging out of foster care.

**Independent living skills training** is available throughout the state to assist youth in preparing to transition out of foster care. Training is geared to help youth gain knowledge of budgeting, housekeeping, cooking, job readiness, housing, emergency and safety skills, and

educational opportunities.

Since the late 1980s, Arizona has had an **Independent Living Subsidy Program**, which allows youth in foster care who are at least 17 years old and employed or full-time students to live in housing on their own. DES case managers continue to assist and monitor each youth's activities and coordinate supportive services to help them make a smooth transition to self-sufficiency. The state assists the youth with housing and living expenses in lieu of a foster care payment to a licensed provider. Acceptance into the program is dependent on approval by DES and the juvenile court.



The 1999 and 2000 changes in federal and state law described above allow youth in foster care who turn 18 to remain in the state's child welfare system voluntarily until they are 21 years old; this program is called the **Voluntary Foster Care Program for Young Adults**. Youth who choose to end foster care program involvement after reaching age 18 and who later wish to apply for support and services are able to do so through the **Transitional Independent Living Program**. Through this post-foster care support program, community-based providers are available statewide to serve eligible youth. Individualized assistance is available for former foster care youth; assistance may include financial aid, housing, health insurance enrollment, counseling, employment, education and other appropriate support services.

In addition, state law allows youth who are in foster care at age 18 to continue to receive health insurance through the **Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS)**; youth do not need to stay in foster care past their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to receive this health insurance benefit.

### Foster Care Facts\*

- There are 6,270 Arizona children in foster care.
- Thirty-five percent (2,192 children) are between the ages of 13 and 17; another 4 percent are more than 18 years old (236 young adults).
- Sixteen percent of youth in foster care are over age 16 and have a case plan goal of independent living (1,073 youth) ; another 8 percent (493 youth) are over age 16 and have a goal of long-term foster care.
- Almost 46 percent of foster care youth live in Maricopa County; 34 percent live in Pima County, and the remaining 20 percent live in other areas of Arizona. \*\*
- Upon reaching the age of majority, 378 young adults left foster care from October 2001 through September 2002.

\* Source: DES Child Welfare Reporting Requirements Semi-annual Reports (March 2002 and September 2002).

\*\* Source: Arizona Supreme Court, Foster Care Review Board. 2003 Report and Recommendations. January 2003. Statistics as of November 1, 2002.



# Methodology

To better understand issues facing youth as they transitioned from being part of the foster care system to living independently, Children's Action Alliance (CAA) undertook a series of focus groups and interviews with 39 youth across Arizona.

Youth were identified as possible participants through several means. The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) solicited names from case managers across the state. In addition, CAA worked with private social service agencies, including Casey Family Programs and Florence Crittenton, to gather names of potential project participants. These agencies were asked to provide the names of youth over age 16 who are currently facing the transition out of foster care or who already have "aged out" of care. Youth were contacted by CAA<sup>3</sup> and asked to participate in a focus group or telephone interview.

## **Characteristics:**

Youth participating in these discussions came from a variety of places and represent a variety of experiences within the foster care system.<sup>4</sup> The figures below are reported in both percentages as well as the number of survey respondents.

**Location:** Youth from several Arizona communities participated, including Chandler, Elfrida, Flagstaff, Glendale, Mesa, Page, Phoenix, Prescott Valley, Sierra Vista, Tucson and Yuma.

**Age:** Sixty-nine percent (24) of participants were between 16 and 19 years old and another 14 percent (5) were 20 or 21 years old.

**Foster Care Setting:** Twenty-four percent (8) of participants had been part of the foster care system for fewer than five years; 38 percent (13) had been part of the foster care system between five and 10 years; and, 38 percent (13) had been part of the foster care system for 11 or more years. Thirty-nine percent (14) of participants had been in four or fewer foster care settings during their time in foster care, while 26 percent (9) had been in between five and 10 settings.

**Education Level:** Twenty-six percent (9) of participants had not graduated from high school; 14 percent (5) were working on their GED; and, 37 percent (13) were enrolled in college or employment/training classes.

**Employment:** Sixty percent (21) of participants were employed. Of those not employed at the time, 80 percent (11) said they would like to be.

**Health Insurance:** Twelve percent (4) of participants did not have health insurance; 65 percent (23) of participants were provided health insurance through a public program (like AHCCCS or CMDP); and, 15 percent (5) received health insurance through their employer.

***Homelessness:*** Of the youth participants who were already living on their own, 28 percent (5) indicated that they had spent some time “living on the street.”



***Independent Living Skills:*** Fifteen percent (5) of participants indicated they had not taken independent living skills classes while in foster care. Of those who did not take these classes, 60 percent (3) reported that the classes were not offered to them.

### **Issues Discussed:**

In these discussions, participants were asked a variety of questions and discussed a broad range of issues associated with transitioning from foster care to independence. Youth participants were asked to describe:

- The components of the plan that they made to help them transition from being in foster care to being independent. Commonly referred to as a “transition plan,” elements might include a plan for housing, transportation, ways to get health care needs addressed, education, employment, etc.
- Changes they needed to make to the plan and why the changes were necessary.
- Assistance they received in setting and altering the plan.
- The hardest and easiest aspects of making the transition from foster care to independence.
- Recommendations for youth transitioning from foster care to independence.
- And, recommendations to improve the state foster care system.



# Findings

Discussions with youth about the transition from foster care to living independently revealed a number of barriers and facilitating factors to their success. In addition, participants provided their perspectives on the ways in which the foster care system could help youth make the transition more successfully. Key topics that emerged from these discussions include:

- **The plan to transition from foster care to independence**
  - **Support networks**
  - **Information and resources**
  - **Independent Living Skills Training**
  - **Gradual transitions from foster care to independence**
  - **Rights of youth in foster care**
  - **School-work balance**
  - **Budgeting and finance**

## **The plan to transition from foster care to independence**

Youth participants were asked to describe the plans prepared for their transition from foster care and, if they had already left the system, how these plans compared to the realities of being on their own. Overwhelmingly, youth discussed two facets of their plan: education and living situations. Almost everyone discussed completing or obtaining additional education or training as part of their plan. Youth saw this as important to securing a job that could support them in the short term as well as part of their long-term stability. As one youth said:

*“My plan right now is to finish high school and go on to college. I think that is really important. Ultimately, I want to be a social worker, and I know you need college for that.” (Phoenix)*

In addition, participants generally talked about securing stable living arrangements as part of their transition plan. For some, this meant securing an apartment, living in a college dormitory or living with a family member. For others, it meant continuing to live with a foster family. As one youth said:

*“I knew I wanted to be living by myself in an apartment. My caseworker said I should look for a roommate. But, I didn’t want to live with a stranger. So, I just kept to my plan. I got an apartment. That worked for a while, but now I’m living with my aunt.” (Phoenix)*

For these youth, the question was not so much “if” they had a plan, but how realistic it was and if they had the resources to help them adapt to needed changes in the plan. For most of the discussion participants, things did not develop exactly as their plan had identified. Changes needed to be made as they confronted new obstacles or problems.



A major area of divergence between foster youth who were able to remain stable and those who were not was their ability to modify the plan. Those who had the personal resources or a support network of case managers, friends or family members were better able to adjust their plans as their life shifted and changed. As one youth said:

*“Everything that I thought I was going to do didn't happen. I was planning on moving out on my 18th birthday. That did not happen. I was planning on getting an apartment by myself, and I had to get a roommate. I kept getting fired or quitting my job. I thought it was going to be a lot easier than it was. It turned out to be really hard. I couldn't do this by myself.” (Phoenix)*

## Support Networks

Youth transitioning from foster care to independence talked extensively about the importance of support networks to help them prepare for and make the transition from being part of the foster care system to being independent. It was clear to just about all of them that they needed the help of key individuals — case managers, friends, family members — to make a successful transition and to face the issues that would confront them as adults. As one youth said:



*“I was doing OK. I was living in my own apartment. But, I still had trouble figuring things out. And you know you can only get someone (a case manager) on the phone before 5 p.m. If it is after that, too bad. Sometimes you just need somebody to ask some questions (of).” (Tucson)*

The primary support that youth had or wanted was from their case manager or foster family. For those foster youth with strong connections to these important individuals, the support fostered their transition to independence. Those that had weaker ties to these important individuals felt they lacked the support network they needed to be successful.



Indeed, those with weaker ties to case managers or family members believed that this greatly disadvantaged them as they set out to be independent.

**With a Support Network.** Support networks provided these youth with several kinds of assistance. Primarily, support networks were a way for youth to develop, fine tune, and implement their transition plan. Youth relied on support networks to help develop the plan and stay focused on the desired outcome:

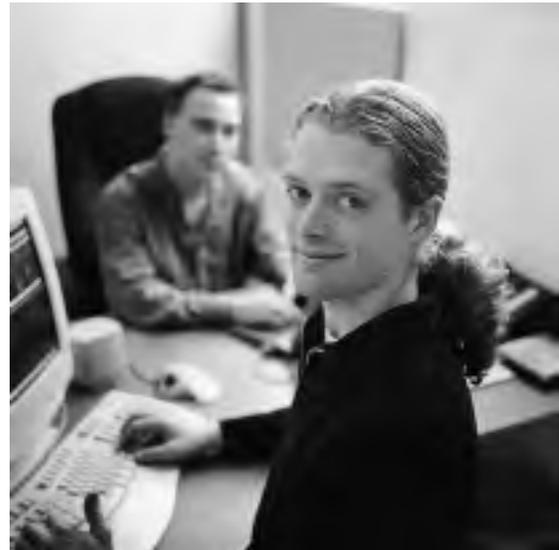
*“I really relied on my Independent Living teacher. We really connected ... She and I talked about my plans and she was always asking how they’re going. We made benchmarks and when I would reach one, she’d do something nice for me. Like this one time, she got me a coffee pot for my apartment, and I hadn’t even moved in yet. It really meant a lot to me.” (Flagstaff)*

*“My foster mom helped me put together my plan. We just talked about the kinds of things I want to do in life. Like, I want to be a doctor. She had me talk to a friend of hers who is a doctor and he told me what it was going to take ... what it was going to be like. That was really helpful. It helped me to focus on my goal.” (Tucson)*

*“Right away, my caseworker started talking about Independent Living classes. At first I said, ‘I don’t need those classes.’ But he kept encouraging me to take them. And he was right. I learned a lot.” (Yuma)*

In addition, these supportive individuals were great sources of information for youth transitioning from the foster care system to independence. For example, youth relied on them for information about their foster care arrangements, about moving toward independence, about programs that are available to them, various program rules, and other resources:

*“I got the feeling like she (the case manager) really cared about my welfare.... We would talk about stuff and she would bring in different points of view and suggest that I think about things differently. She was a great source of information on what the system could offer me and what programs were available. I trusted her advice.” (Phoenix)*



*“My caseworker is really good. He is not burnt out. He only has a few cases on his load because he is going to retire, so he really has time to help me. So, I ask him all*

kinds of stuff and he gives me direction. Whenever I have a problem, he can tell me who to call to get it taken care of.” (Phoenix)

Participants relied on their support networks to help them accomplish more “everyday” tasks — such as finding out about cars, getting information on insurance, or helping in small emergencies. For example, one youth described the time he called on his foster parent to help him when his car broke down:

*“I was able to turn to my caseworker for a lot of things and also my foster family. I asked them for advice on personal stuff, help figuring things out. Just last week, my foster mom gave me a lift to the shop where I was having my car worked on. If I didn’t get that ride, I’m not sure how I would have gotten that car in.”*  
(Phoenix)

**Without a Support Network:** Youth who did not have this kind of support network described having to face these situations on their own. Some articulated feeling lonely, isolated, and unable to get important information as they faced this significant transition:

*“I wish I had had some mentors or something. There are a lot of times that I need to talk to someone and there is really no one around. I don’t have anyone. I guess I just wish I had some kind of support network. I don’t think I can do this all alone.”*  
(Phoenix)

*“You know, other kids could probably ask their parents about stuff. But, hello, I don’t have parents I can ask; I don’t have anybody. So, I guess I’m just out of luck.”*  
(Phoenix)

*“I didn’t really have anyone to talk to when I really needed it. I made a huge number of mistakes ... things that could have been avoided, I’m sure. But, I just had to do it all alone and make all those mistakes.”* (Phoenix)

*“I really wanted to go to college, but it was expensive. So, I was only taking a class at a time. Finally, someone at school told me about these scholarships that I might be able to get. When my caseworker finally called me back, I told him about these and he said he knew all about them. Why he never mentioned them to me when he knew I wanted to go to school, I don’t know. He said he would send me an application, but I never got anything.”* (Yuma)



## Information and Resources

Youth transitioning from foster care to living independently talked about the importance of having



information and access to supportive resources. They described being interested in information on the variety of programs or opportunities available to them — both today and further into the future. Youth noted that they needed this information in several forms — verbally from a trusted source, as well as via the telephone, written materials or the Internet. Several suggested that a resource guide would have been helpful. As the youth said:

*“There needs to be a list or book or something. Something that tells you about all the rules, all the programs, all the benefits and what you have to do to get them. Sometimes you don’t know what is out there and available to you.”*

*(Phoenix)*

*“I don’t know how to get all that stuff (housing, education assistance, health care). CPS should broadcast what it is that we can receive and what it is we have to do to get these benefit type things. A lot of us don’t know this. It is not being thrown in our face.”* *(Phoenix)*

Many lamented that their case manager was not a good source of information. Some believed that their case manager did not know their individual situation or the system well enough to help them obtain the information they needed. Others believed that their case manager was intentionally withholding pertinent information:

*“I didn’t like that (lack of information) about CPS. They throw you off. They don’t give you the information you need. They don’t give you a straight answer. You know ... keep you in the dark ... in the dark about your case or what is happening in the future.”* *(Phoenix)*

*“She (the case manager) didn’t know me real well. I was just another case. She probably had hundreds of kids like me. She was basically just getting by ... I don’t think she ever once asked me what I wanted to do with my life. Like, I wanted to be a nurse, you know, go to nursing school ... well, it is too late now.”* *(Tucson)*

Others suggested that a place — a “one-stop shop” — of information for youth in the foster care system would also be helpful. These youth noted that they needed a place where they could verify what the case manager had told them as well as get additional information.

*“You know, there is all this stuff and programs out there, but I didn’t know it. And the agencies don’t tell you what might be available somewhere else. There needs to be a place that has all the information. ‘Cause you don’t know what you don’t know.”* *(Tucson)*

In particular, the young people cited three specific areas in which they needed more information:

**1). Housing Co-signer:** The need for youth to have a co-signer to lease an apartment was clearly an issue that took many youth by surprise and hindered their plans to secure housing. Youth reported that if they did not have a co-signer, many housing complexes would either not rent to them or ask them to come up with a very large security deposit. As most did not have substantial savings or someone in their support network who they could call on to be a co-signer, many were unable to follow through on their plan of getting an apartment. As one youth said:



*“I had been saving up for an apartment. I knew that I was going to have to come up with a security deposit, and all. Well, I went out looking and no one would rent to me because I wasn’t 18 and I had no credit history. So finally, I found a place that would rent to me but they charged me a boatload of money ... everything that I had saved up ... my emergency money. Well, that was a big mistake, because you know something always happens. And, I didn’t have any money saved up. So something happens (an emergency) and I’m already not paying bills and getting behind. I had only been there like a month.” (Phoenix)*

**2). Health Insurance:** Most youth knew that they had some kind of insurance while in the foster care system. Of those participating in the Young Adult Program, most knew that they continued to have health insurance through the state. For youth who were no longer associated with the state, there was some confusion over what benefits they might be eligible for. As one youth said:

*“In terms of health, I really didn’t know anything. I still don’t. I know that I get health insurance because I’m in YAP, but does that run out when I’m 21? I have no idea..” (Phoenix)*

**3). Continuation of Independent Living Subsidy:** Most of the youth who participated in this project knew that they might be eligible to continue to receive an Independent Living Subsidy past their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday if they met certain requirements. However, there was often confusion over what the requirements are and how to make sure they remain in the program. In some cases, youth did not even know this option was available to them. As one youth said:

*“I know I am about to be cut off in January. But this girl here (another focus group participant) told me that she is getting some kind of subsidy and she is 19. How is that? How can I get that? I got to ask my caseworker about this.” (Phoenix)*



## **Independent Living Skills Training**

Participants were specifically asked to talk about the kinds of skills they learned as part of Independent Living Skills Training. First, it is important to note that



not all youth had participated in Independent Living Skills Training. Some are eligible to take an Independent Living Skills test. If they pass, they are not required to take independent living classes. Interestingly, several participants reported that they were not offered any independent living classes.

Generally, youth who participated in Independent Living Skills Training gave it mixed reviews in terms of usefulness. Many felt they knew much of the information that was covered in the classes; that the classes were more like “refresher” courses. Some noted that the courses covered information that they knew, but did not cover information that was critical to their transition:

*“I don’t remember them talking about credit. Yes, they talked about credit cards and debt and stuff, but not like building up a credit history. I didn’t know what that was about or how important it was. I was out there in the world ignorant.” (Page)*

*“I think I could have used more in-depth classes. The classes need to be more realistic. They think we can’t handle realistic. It is all like play... using play money and stuff. But we have to be realistic. We have no choice, right? Kids who are about to leave need to be told the real deal.” (Flagstaff)*

Participants also talked about the ages at which they began Independent Living Skills Training. Most believed that starting when a youth is 16 is about the correct age. These participants stated that starting to teach these skills any earlier would not have been productive, as the lessons would have been lost on youth who are not yet ready to think about being on their own. Others, however, suggested that Independent Living Skills Training should be started earlier. These participants noted that they did not think that participating in a “skill building” class at a young age was the answer, but exposing youth to independent living ideas and exercises at younger ages would help prepare them to take independent living classes seriously. Ultimately, they recommend that these skills be taught over a longer period of time.



Finally, some youth called for a greater ability to practice the skills that were covered in the Independent Living Skills Training. They believe that without time to practice the skills in real-life settings, the classes were somewhat meaningless. This was particularly an issue for youth living in group homes who reported that they were not able to make phone calls without prior permission from case managers and therapists, which would have allowed them to practice skills like obtaining information on social service programs, housing options or bank accounts. Youth who did have “hands-on” experiences generally felt better able to handle these tasks once they lived independently. As youth said:

*“My foster family had me do all kinds of things. I was really in to horses. But, it is expensive to ride. So, they said if I wanted to*

ride, I had to work and save the money to pay. And, I had to get certain grades in school. This was a big motivator for me. It really helped me to learn to be organized and independent and good with money.” (Tucson)



“I took those (Independent Living Skills Training) classes. They were OK. It was some stuff I know and some stuff I didn’t. I was living in a group home. You know, they did every thing for us. I never had to make an appointment or pay a bill. Honestly, the first time I ever saw an electric bill was after I moved out. I never thought about any of this until I was already about and trying to do it all on my own. It was a big wake up call.” (Phoenix)



## **Gradual Transition from Foster Care to Independence**

Several youth offered the observation that they wished that the transition from foster care to living on their own had been more gradual. These youth noted that in some ways they felt ready to make the transition, but in other ways they did not:

*“I missed a lot of high school during that time. There was no one there to tell you to get up and go to school. I would sleep through my alarm half the time. When I was in the system, I had no problem getting up and getting to school. But when I was on my own, it was a different story.” (Phoenix)*

For these youth, a slower transition would have enabled them to build skills and gradually learn what it meant to live independently without having to bear all the risks of being independent. Many also noted that they felt that they had little in terms of a support network to fall back on. These youth believe that without a gradual transition, they were more likely to experience a minor emergency as a major setback:

*“I wish they (DES) could figure out a way to give you a little freedom at a time. Instead of one day saying, ‘You’re on your own, good-bye.’ When you are 18, you are still a teen and immature at times. It is really a lot to deal with being all alone.” (Phoenix)*

*“I wish there had been some assistance in terms of when I moved into my own apartment. There should be like transitional housing or something. I wasn’t fully ready to be on my own. It would have been good to be out of the group home but still under their watch and guidance. I still needed people to check in with but I really didn’t have anyone. This would have been helpful for about a year. You don’t really understand what it is going to be like until the bills start coming in. That is life. But I didn’t have anyone to help me ... to fall back on. I just remember I cried all the time.” (Phoenix)*



**Peer Networks.** As can be seen throughout these results, youth transitioning from foster care to being independent commented frequently on support networks. Some youth reported that it would be helpful to build a support network that involved other youth transitioning from foster care to independence. This observation took two forms. First, some youth talked about the importance of getting a chance to interact with other youth in the foster care system. They believed that they could benefit from getting to know others who are going through the same issues. Second, some youth indicated that they would have found it beneficial to hear about the transition from foster care to living independently from young adults who have made the transition. They believed that this would have been another, valuable source of information and might have been able to influence their thinking in ways that conversations with adults did not. As the youth said:

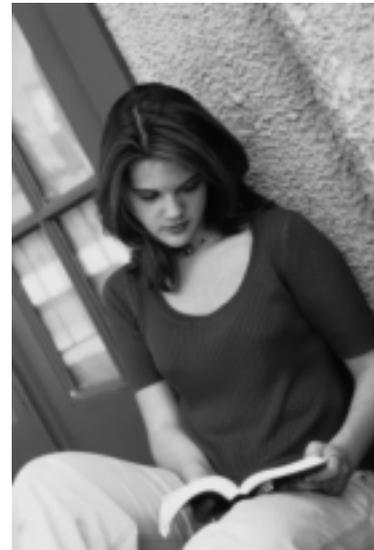
*“I think it would have helped to hear from older youth as to what it was going to look like. It might have helped. They might have been able to tell me what was going on instead of always relying on my case manager. I couldn't trust her. In some ways, kids will listen to other kids more than adults. Kids are going through the same things and can relate to the experiences.” (Phoenix)*

*“Having some people my own age that I could talk to about being in foster care really helped. These people were like me, going through the same things I was. I learned a lot from them.” (Tucson)*

## **Rights of Youth in Foster Care**

Several participants indicated that they wished they knew their rights and the opportunities available to them as foster children. They believed that knowing this information would have enabled them to better make necessary choices before and during the transition. Some noted that their case managers or foster families told them about some of their rights and program opportunities. Others noted that they received little or no correct information from these individuals. These participants suggested that having a booklet that outlines their rights and tells them where to get more information, and having discussions about rights and responsibilities would have been very helpful:

*“There are a lot of kids out there that don't know their rights, until it is too late. There should be a class or book or something that kids could use to learn about their rights. That way, they can stick up for themselves and know what is out there for them.”*



(Phoenix)

*“We need to know our rights. They have this piece of paper that says our rights. But that ain’t all there is to know. I need to know about my options.” (Phoenix)*

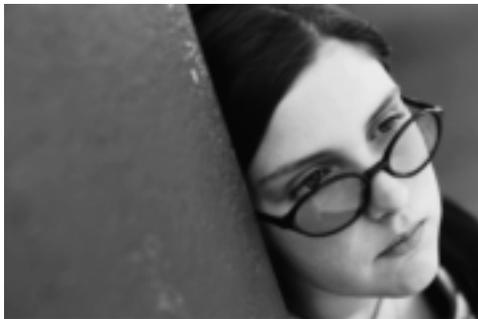


## **School-Work Balance**

Several youth talked about balancing high school and work responsibilities. Most said that they needed to work because they needed money for personal items, basic needs and housing costs. Others noted that they liked working because it was more pleasant and satisfying than their home environment.

A handful of participants reported having no trouble balancing school and work obligations. However, many more described the difficulty of balancing these two obligations.

For many of these youth, working large numbers of hours negatively impacted their school work. As the youth said:



*“I feel like I kind of messed up part of this year because I was working a lot and I let some of my grades slip. I would be in school all day and then work until 10:30 p.m. and then try to do homework until about 12:30. Then get up early and start again. I was working 30 hours a week and it was hard to keep it all organized. I finally realized that I made a bit of a mistake.” (Yuma)*

*“I was working 40 hours a week at the Wal-Mart as a cashier and going to high school full time. I wanted to finish high school. It was important to me. But, I would be so tired out and wouldn’t get up in time for school. I thought I could do it all, but it was just too hard. So, I dropped out.” (Flagstaff)*

*“The subsidy is really not enough to live on, especially if you want to finish up school and take school seriously. I was in school full time trying to finish my high school degree. I really couldn’t work, but I had no choice. I had to get a job This made things a lot harder.” (Phoenix)*

## **Budgeting and Finance**

When participants were asked to identify the area that gave them the most



concern as they made the transition from being in foster care to being on their own, budgeting and finances were almost universally mentioned. Having enough money to pay the bills, keeping finances straight, understanding financial issues, such as credit history and debt, and the role they play in being fully independent all weighed heavily on the youths' minds.

For some youth, financial and budgeting problems were the first kinds of difficulties they encountered when moving out on their own:

*“Definitely managing the money was the hardest. You see, all of the sudden, you’ve got all this money and all this freedom. I spent all my money on party stuff. But then the electric bill arrives and you ain’t got any money left. That was hard.”* (Phoenix)

*“The hardest thing is the reality ... the reality of paying bills. Money comes and goes fast. You don’t realize it. I was working on and off and money was real tight. Sometimes, I had to go without food just to pay all the bills. Keeping it all together is harder than it seems.”* (Phoenix)

Participants described the kinds of budgeting and finance issues addressed in independent living classes. The skills covered included how to write a check, how to open a savings account, and how to create a family budget. Most youth noted that they knew these basic concepts prior to taking independent living classes. Some noted that the budgeting and finance classes were more “play” exercises than really having the opportunity to test one’s skills. As one youth said:

*“It is one thing to talk about money in (independent living) class. It wasn’t real. But it was another thing when you were on your own. Your friends are like, ‘Let’s go’ ... and now I am behind on a couple bills.”* (Tucson)

Budgeting and finance were so significant that youth identified it as the most important skill to cultivate in order to make a successful transition.

# Recommendations



Arizona youth identified a broad spectrum of issues they faced as they transitioned from being part of the foster care system to being independent. From these findings, a number of policy and program recommendations emerge.

Changing the system to better support youth transitioning from foster care to independence is the responsibility of many including: Arizona’s public agencies for child welfare and employment services (Department of Economic Security — DES), health care (Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System — AHCCCS), mental health care (Department of Health Services — DHS), education (Department of Education — ADE), housing (Department of Housing), and case managers, contracted community-based agencies, faith-based institutions, civic organizations, schools, post-secondary educational institutions and even the business community that may help prepare and employ youth transitioning out of foster care.



**Support the key adult/youth connection** — At least one year prior to a youth’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, DES needs to ensure that at least one adult is designated to mentor and coach each youth in the process of transitioning from foster care. Community-based agencies, faith-based institutions, civic organizations and the business community could all play an important role in shoring up this resource for youth.

Ideally this connection would be in place for several years, but no less than through the first year after leaving foster care. Whether it is the foster parent, group home leader, case manager, social service provider, community advisor, or independent living skills instructor, youth transitioning from foster care need a strong connection to an adult they can trust to provide them with support and information. While some adults now serve in this role, for too many youth, the connection has been lost or was never fully established.

**Increase training** — The federal John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act requires the state to use a portion of federal funds to provide training to foster parents, adoptive parents, group home staff and DES case managers on issues confronting adolescents preparing for independent living [Sec. 477 (b) (3) (D)].

DES must ensure that all the adults helping youth to transition from foster care to independence receive the needed specialized and continuing training. As youth rely



so heavily on these individuals for information and support, these adults need to be well informed and prepared to help youth make the transition.

Although Maricopa and Pima counties have specialized case management units for young adults, the other counties do not have the resources to allow for specialized units.

Each DES child welfare district should have at least one CPS Program Specialist designated as the independent living expert to assist foster care providers and case managers in accessing community resources and training on the needs of youth transitioning from foster care.

**Provide information on the rights of foster children** — Every child in foster care should know their rights and what to do if they feel their rights are being violated.

DES should provide and/or ensure youth have written information and informational sessions on their rights and program opportunities. A legal advocacy or community-based provider could also seek funding from a foundation or civic group to ensure that this important resource is available.

**Develop other sources of information** — Youth need to access information in a variety of formats. DES should make transitional and resource information available to youth in and out of care via the Internet, a toll-free hotline telephone number, and printed resource guides.

In addition, each DES district has contracts with community-based agencies to provide transitional services to eligible youth. Youth and all other social service agencies providing services to youth must be made aware of these available services.

DES should ensure that contracts with community-based services include provisions for outreach to youth and to other community and faith-based entities to ensure that others are aware of the services available to youth who have aged out of foster care.

Finally, DES and community partners should recruit youth who have successfully made the transition from foster care to independence to participate in independent living seminars and mentor youth.





**Expand opportunities to learn and practice independent living skills** — DES should amend group care provider contracts and foster home agreements to ensure that foster care providers allow youth to practice independent living skills. Contracted community-based agencies and foster parents should be made aware of this concern and take the initiative to review their program activities and ensure appropriate and adequate practice opportunities are available for youth.

This may mean a revision of the course structure and curriculum as well as any group care or foster home licensing rules that prohibit appropriate skills learning. In addition, independent living skills instructors should share ideas with foster care providers for specific activities that youth could engage in to help support skills building.

**Create an environment that encourages youth to complete high school** — As part of the independent living program, youth are encouraged to have employment preparation experiences and get a job.



Additionally, youth feel the need to supplement their meager personal and clothing allowances provided by the state. However, the emphasis on employment and the youth's need for additional monies have outweighed an important focus on education.

DES, ADE and all public schools need to place much more emphasis on encouraging and helping youth in foster care complete high school or at the very least, obtain their GED. Additionally, DES and the Governor should request, and the legislature should fund, an increase in personal and clothing allowances to realistically reflect the cost of living.

**Create an environment that helps youth from foster care continue with post-secondary education** — Once youth from foster care do finish high school or obtain their GED, there is little encouragement to go on to post-secondary education opportunities.

Some 17 states have implemented programs that provide tuition waivers and



supportive services to foster care or adopted youth who go on to education or trade programs beyond high school.

As the state takes on the role of parent to these youth, the Governor, state legislature, state universities, community colleges, and DES need to work cooperatively to encourage more youth in foster care to continue with post-secondary educational opportunities. A clear incentive would be to develop a post-secondary tuition waiver and educational transition support program for these youth.

**Ease the housing transition** — DES should lead the development of public-private partnerships that help ease these vulnerable youth into housing independence.

The Independent Living Subsidy Program has helped many youth 17 and older ease the transition to independent living. Yet, this subsidy program is available to only certain eligible youth. More youth need help in transitioning from an adult supervised living situation to one of living entirely on their own.

To supplement the Independent Living Subsidy Program, DES should work with the Arizona Department of Housing and local housing authorities as well as community and faith-based agencies to develop transitional housing opportunities where youth could live in apartments that are owned, operated and supervised by community agencies knowledgeable about the needs of youth.

Additionally, DES should encourage more youth to take advantage of programs that help them slow the transition, including remaining part of the system after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. This additional time would enable them to continue to build skills and gain confidence.

**Increase the Independent Living Subsidy rate** — A low subsidy rate cripples a youth's ability to create a stable environment as they transition to independence. For many, it means having to choose work over finishing school, which may have long-term detrimental effects on independence. Increasing the basic independent living subsidy rate can help youth remain in stable situations.

DES and the Governor should request, and the legislature should fund, an increase in the independent living subsidy rate to realistically reflect the cost of living with an incentive to encourage youth to complete high school.

# Endnotes



- 1 Westat, Inc. *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth*. (Washington, D.C.:HHS.1991).
- 2 Resources On: *Foster Care and Homeless Youth, Casey Family Programs, Online*, July 2001.
- 3 In Tucson, Casey Family Programs and DES staff contacted potential youth participants and invited them to participate in a focus group discussion.
- 4 These data are based on project participant surveys. Not all participants completed a survey. Figures here represent information from 35 project respondents. While we did not collect specific statistics on race or ethnicity, youth of a variety of races and ethnicities, including multi-racial youth, participated in these discussions.





# Appendix: Relevant State Laws

## Arizona Revised Statutes

### Children: Child Welfare and Placement

#### **8-521. Independent living program; conditions; eligibility; rules; reports**

A. The department or a licensed child welfare agency may establish an independent living program for youths who are the subject of a dependency petition or who are adjudicated dependent and are all of the following:

1. In the custody of the department or a licensed child welfare agency.
2. At least seventeen years of age.
3. Employed or full-time students.

B. The independent living program may consist of a residential program of less than twenty-four hours' a day supervision for youths under the supervision of the department through a licensed child welfare agency or a foster home under contract with the department. Under the independent living program the youth is not required to reside at a licensed child welfare agency or foster home.

C. The director or the director's designee shall review and approve any recommendation to the court that a youth in the custody of the department be ordered to an independent living program.

D. For a youth to participate in an independent living program, the court must order such a disposition pursuant to section 8-845.

E. The department or a licensed child welfare agency having custody of the youth shall provide the cost of care as required by section 46-134 for each child placed in an independent living program pursuant to this section, except that the monthly amount provided shall not exceed the average monthly cost of purchased services for the child in the three months immediately preceding placement in an independent living program.

F. The department shall adopt rules pursuant to title 41, chapter 6 to carry out the purposes of this section.

G. The department shall provide quarterly progress reports to the court and to local foster care review boards for each youth participating in the independent living program.

H. The local foster care review boards shall review at least once every six months the case of each youth participating in the independent living program.

#### **8-521.01. Transitional independent living program**

A. The department may establish a transitional independent living program for persons who meet the following qualifications:

1. The person is under twenty-one years of age.
2. The person was the subject of a dependency petition, adjudicated dependent or placed voluntarily pursuant to section 8-806.

B. The department shall provide care and services that complement the person's own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and to accept personal responsibility for preparing for and making the transition to adulthood. The care and services provided shall be based on an individualized written agreement between the department and the person.



C. Care and services may be provided as follows:

1. If the person was in out-of-home placement or in the independent living program when the person became eighteen years of age, the department may provide out-of-home placement, independent living or other transitional living support services.

2. If the person was in out-of-home placement in the custody of the department while the person was sixteen, seventeen or eighteen years of age, the department may provide transitional living support services.

### **Public Health and Safety: AHCCCS:**

#### **36-2901. Definitions**

In this article, unless the context otherwise requires:

...

6. "Eligible person" means any person who is:

(a) Any of the following:

...

(iii) Under twenty-one years of age and who was in the custody of the department of economic security pursuant to title 8, chapter 5 or 10 when the person became eighteen years of age.

### **Welfare: Department of Economic Security**

#### **46-134. Powers and duties; expenditure; limitation**

A. The state department shall:

2. Administer child welfare activities, including:

...

(c) Providing the cost of care of:

(iii) Children who are the subject of a dependency petition or are adjudicated dependent and who are in the custody of the department and ordered by the court pursuant to section 8-845 to reside in an independent living program pursuant to section 8-521.

...

14. Provide the cost of care and transitional independent living services for a person under twenty-one years of age pursuant to section 8-521.01.











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