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YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES  
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Assuring  
**STABLE** Homes

FROM FOSTER HOME TO HOMELESS:  
Strategies to Prevent Homelessness for Youth  
Transitioning from Foster Care

June, 2014





The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, with the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, Melville Charitable Trust, and Butler Family Fund is sponsoring a one day symposium on the intersection of foster care and homelessness. The symposium is meant to bring together groups that have historically worked along parallel lines, but not worked closely together.

The brief report that follows is focused on reducing homelessness among young people who have been in foster care. It certainly does not contain all the answers, but is offered to spark discussion and to help build a cross-system national consensus on what needs to be done and how to do it.

## INTRODUCTION

Each year approximately 26,000 young people “age out” of foster care in the United States. They face extraordinary challenges as they attempt to navigate their way from adolescence to adulthood. Often they lack consistent, positive relationships with caring adults and do not have access to the supports and services they need. Unlike most young people making the transition to adulthood in the United States, youth who age out of the foster care system typically lack a family to rely on and must make the transition to independence much more quickly and much earlier than their peers. At the same time, they face unique obstacles that make it much more difficult to transition successfully to adulthood.

While some young people display remarkable resiliency, and do quite well, many more struggle mightily and their outcomes as a group – in education, employment, staying out of the criminal justice system, avoiding risky behaviors and other facets of their lives – tend to be very poor. In some of the worst instances they experience homelessness and are literally without a place to sleep.

Homelessness following foster care is not a rare occurrence. Indeed, the back door of the foster care system is the front door of the homeless system. Just as responsibility ceases for one system, it begins for the other. Some observers describe foster care as a “pipeline” to homelessness.

The Midwest Evaluation found that by age 26, 36% of former foster young people whose outcomes were known had reported at least one episode of homelessness<sup>1</sup>. Other reports and studies vary in documenting the precise number of youth who become homeless after leaving care, and some utilize different definitions of youth and/or homelessness. No matter the exact count, all observers agree that the numbers are shockingly high and may be growing.

Experiencing homelessness reflects a severe level of disconnectedness. Most of us, whatever rough circumstances we might be experiencing, would have family, friends, financial resources, or a service delivery system to fall back on before becoming homeless. To have none of these safety nets is tragic. Descriptions of homeless young people, and their own words, tell of depression, exploitation, danger, victimization and trauma after trauma, add-

1. Dworsky, A., Napolitano, L., & Courtney, M. (2013). Homelessness during the transition from foster care to adulthood. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103, 318-323.

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ed to the trauma that they had already experienced in their own homes and in the foster care system.

A growing majority of American young adults deal with some of the stress of emerging adulthood by living with family. Their difficulties are cushioned by the availability of a family home which most often provides emotional and financial support. A Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey data showed that 65 percent of 18-24 year olds lived with family in 2011, up from 54 percent in 2001<sup>2</sup>.

For a large portion of young adults leaving foster care, going home is not an available or desirable path. Instead, in most jurisdictions, they are forced to rely on an under-resourced, poorly coordinated patchwork of public and private services that is designed to help them deal with only some of their challenges and only for a limited time.

## The Roots of Homelessness

Understanding the roots of homelessness among youth and young adults aging out of foster care is difficult and complex. Homelessness and housing instability most often come as a result of personal, family and/or economic factors. Often these factors are present in combination.

### Housing and economic factors

Like many of their peers, young people aging out of foster care confront an employment and housing market that is unusually difficult. Even advantaged young people face historically high unemployment rates of 19% for the young adult population as a whole, the highest rate since 1949<sup>3</sup>. Employment prospects for young people leaving foster care are far more troubling. “The Midwest Evaluation found that as many as 54% of the young people who aged out of foster care were not employed at age 26<sup>1</sup> compared to 20% of their peers in the general population.<sup>4</sup>

Further, even when employed, young people leaving foster care as a group earn far less, on average, than their peers<sup>5</sup>. Their ability to break into the job market at any but the lowest, most poorly paid rung of the ladder often consigns them to unstable, non-skilled employment that hampers their ability to put together a strong work history. Low-wage jobs lead to more low-wage jobs, frequently part time or temporary and rarely with basic fringe benefits. Unlike many of their more affluent and well-connected peers, whose parents can help them find good starter jobs and help them overcome obstacles, young people aging out of foster care lack the opportunity to start employment in an advantageous position.

Other factors, such as a poor academic history, early parenthood, untreated mental health issues, or a juvenile or criminal record also influence a young person’s ability to find and retain employment. Competing in the job market without a high school or post-secondary degree or other strong education credentials is an important factor contributing to the incidence of homelessness for young people leaving foster care. Young people often enter foster care having education related challenges and placement instability while in the foster care system compounds these challenges as young people move from school to school and fall further and further behind. It is not surprising that the achievement levels and high school graduation rates of young people in foster care fall below the national average. Despite strong aspirations to continue their education these negative experiences in school, lack of financial and familial support, and personal factors deter many young people from pursuing post-

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2. Weissman, J., Here’s Exactly How Many College Graduates Live Back at Home. The Atlantic. February 26, 2013.

3. Smith, C. *A growing problem: Fresh out of foster care and homeless*. Seattle Post-Intelligencer. October 17, 2010.

4. Scribner, H. *No homes, no goals for foster kids who age out*. Deseret News National Edition. February 21, 2014

5. Young people who age out of care also experience poorer income and employment outcomes compared to the general population as well as to other disadvantaged populations. Former foster youth in the Midwest Study were less likely than their counterparts to be employed at the time of the survey (48 percent versus 76 percent, respectively) and made about \$4 less per hour than their peers (\$10.14 versus \$13.94, respectively). Median earnings for Midwest Study participants were only \$8,000 for the past year, compared to median earnings of \$18,300 for their counterparts.



secondary education.

For those young people who do attempt post-secondary education, only a fraction are able to successfully complete their pursuit and often leave programs with student debt rather than a degree or certificate of completion. Some young people aging out of foster care enter post-secondary institutions simply to avoid homelessness since that is the only “choice” they have when supports and services after age 18 are limited to those enrolled in school. With school serving as a survival tool to secure housing and other benefits, even minor academic, social, and emotional challenges can become a trigger for homelessness.

Chronic unemployment and under-employment are compounded by a persistent shortage of safe, stable, and affordable housing. Accessing affordable housing can be challenging for young people leaving foster care. Often they are seen by landlords as risky potential tenants. They are too young to have an extensive credit history or job record, are disproportionately minority or LGBT, rarely have a co-signer available and often cannot afford rent and/or utility deposits. The combination of low and unsteady wages and a difficult housing market come together most clearly in studies that compare the cost of housing with the capacity to earn. In New York State, for example, a worker earning minimum wage would need to work 124 hours per week, the equivalent of three full time jobs, to afford a modest rent.<sup>6</sup>

The imbalance between available housing costs and earning power hits hard at young adults who are parenting. The added costs of child care and transportation to work and/or school creates difficult if not insurmountable problems and stresses. Families make up one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. Young people ages 18 to 24 years old head 26% of homeless families.<sup>7</sup>

## Personal and Family Factors

One observer noted that the “Most common causes of youth homelessness are domestic crises in which parents give up on their kids or vice versa, juvenile justice and foster care systems that abandon youth who serve their time or age out and poor medical care for kids with addictions or psychiatric disorders.”<sup>8</sup> The National Alliance to End Homelessness states that “Beyond the factors of poverty, lack of affordable housing, low education levels, unemployment, mental health, and substance abuse, youth homelessness is largely a reflection of family breakdown.”<sup>9</sup> In some instances, for example, family strain is complicated by a young person’s sexual orientation in a family incapable of accepting differences.

While there is a great need for more high-quality research on the topic of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth and homelessness to inform policies and practices, most observers point to an over-representation of these youth among the homeless.<sup>10</sup> In fact, a national survey of homeless centers and agencies that serve youth found that 40 percent of those served identify as LGBT.<sup>11</sup> These youth are more likely to become homeless at younger ages and to be sexually assaulted on the streets and in shelters. In one study, as many as 56% of LGBTQ youth in care spent some time homeless because they felt safer on the streets.<sup>12</sup>

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6. Out of Reach 2014. National Low Income Housing Coalition. 2014.

7. Smith, C. *A growing problem: Fresh out of foster care and homeless*. Seattle Post-Intelligencer. October 17, 2010

8. Lightfoot, J. *Serving homeless youth with a continuum of customized care*. Crosscut. February 24, 2014.

9. Fact Sheet: Youth Homelessness. National Alliance to End Homelessness. January 2010.

10. Child Trends. *Homelessness among LGBT Youth: A National Concern*. November 18, 2013

<http://www.childtrends.org/homelessness-among-lgbt-youth-a-national-concern/>

11. Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2011). *Information memorandum: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth in foster care*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

12. <http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/bestpracticeslgbtyouth.pdf?docID=1322>

Mallon, G. P. (1998). We don't exactly get the welcome wagon: *The experience of gay and lesbian adolescents in North America's child welfare system*. New York: Columbia University Press. Cited in Wilber, S., Ryan, C., & Marksamer, J. (2006). *CWLA Best Practice Guidelines: Serving LGBT Youth in Out of Home Care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.



Growing up in an unstable and troubled family can have profound and long lasting consequences. Research from neuroscience supports the common knowledge that young people do not reach adulthood at a predetermined age, but rather that adolescent brains continue developing until about the mid-twenties. The transition to adulthood, including the periods of adolescence and “emerging adulthood” (18 to 25), is a critical time during which the brain is primed to take risks that enable young people to practice independence in key areas of life—including employment, education, housing, and relationships—and learn from their experiences and mistakes. Developmentally appropriate services and supportive connections with friends, family, and the community during this stage are critical to the success of a young person’s transition to adulthood, including their ability to develop resilience and avoid homelessness.

Some youth are immediately homeless upon emancipation and are transported by their social workers directly to homeless shelters. For example, a study of former foster youth in the Las Vegas area found that nearly one-third of emancipated youth were discharged from care without a place to live.<sup>13 14</sup> Others become homeless after a period of unstable living situations or after returning to the homes of their birth families and finding that the situations there are still unsafe and unsustainable. Studies of former foster youth have shown that the post-exit experiences of young people are often characterized by housing instability, with young people experiencing multiple moves and living arrangements within just a few years of emancipation.<sup>15 16 17 18 19</sup>

Beneath poor housing, permanency, education, employment, and health outcomes lies an undercurrent of compromised social-emotional well-being among young people who age out of care. Most often youth in foster care experienced trauma in their birth homes and that trauma was compounded by their entry into the foster care system.

Research on the adolescent brain has shown that the trauma of abuse and neglect, removal from the home, multiple foster care placements, and the stress associated with a lack of stability during childhood and adolescence can stunt a young person’s social-emotional development, which in turn can hinder their opportunities to stay in school, obtain and sustain employment, manage a stable living situation, and form and maintain healthy relationships with people and institutions to whom they can turn for support.

## The Opportunity for Greater Alignment

The good news is that the shocking frequency with which youth formerly in foster care become homeless is gaining attention. Better data now documents the problem, new reports are being written and disseminated, and the issue has become the focus of press coverage in the mainstream media. New and innovative housing and social service programs have been developed in some communities to help homeless youth, but too few resources and too little attention are focused on strengthening families and preventing homelessness before it happens.

Conditions are right for change. A combination of factors has created the opportunity to advocate for deep and

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13. Reily, T. (2003). Transition from Care: Status and Outcomes of Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care. *Child Welfare*, 82(6), 727-46.

14. Dworsky, A., Dillman, K., Dion, M.R., Coffee-Borden, B., & Rosenau, M. (2012). Housing for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: A Review of the Literature and Program Typology. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development & Research. Retrieved from [http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/interim/hsg\\_fter\\_care.html](http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/interim/hsg_fter_care.html)

15. Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. (2010). Assessing the Impact of Extending Care beyond 18 on Homelessness: Findings from the Midwest Study. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/brief/assessing-impact-extending-care-beyond-age-18-homelessness-emerging-findings-midwest>

16. Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J.S., & Rapp, M. (2010). Midwest Study of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>

17. Reily, T.

18. Fowler, P.J., Toro, P.A., Tompsett, C.J., & Hobden, K. (2006). Youth aging out of foster care in southeast Michigan: A follow-up study. Michigan Department of Human Services.

19. Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. (2009). Homelessness and the transition from foster care to adulthood among 19 year old former foster youth. *Child Welfare* 88(4), 23-56.



fundamental changes in the way we serve homeless youth and young adults and those at risk of being homeless. Importantly, while the existence of youth homelessness, including and especially among youth aging out of foster care, is not a new phenomena, it has become the focus of greater attention than ever before. A large number of factors, especially when taken together, account for this momentum:

- Organizations such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Funders Together To End Homelessness, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Sisters of Charity of Cleveland, Melville Charitable Trust, Butler Family Fund and others are raising the visibility of this population
- Research on this population, notably by Chapin Hall and others, has helped to define the nature, causes and prevalence of youth homelessness.
- Federal attention, particularly the multi-sector leadership of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) has provided energy and focus in addressing youth homelessness and homelessness for all populations
- Progress in addressing homelessness for other populations – for example veterans – has created hope that homelessness is indeed a solvable problem
- Changes in federal child welfare policy (notably Fostering Connections) have offered states the opportunity to extend the upper limit for federally financed foster care from 18 to 21 years of age and requires youth directed case planning
- Recognition of the value and importance of youth engagement, i.e. seeking out and listening to “youth voice” in both the direction of their personal plans and in pursuing more effective policies and practices, has broadened
- Neuroscience has provided a better understanding of how youth and young adults develop, while an increased appreciation of the presence and impact of trauma has informed practice
- Increasing attention to the fact that wage levels for young people as a whole have stagnated, unemployment rates have been high for years and even modest housing has become unaffordable for many young adults.

Further, there are current opportunities to build bridges between the systems and organizations most responsible for addressing the high rates at which young people who have been in foster care experience homelessness. The child welfare/social services system and homelessness/housing system are divided by different funding sources, different governance structures, different target populations and related but not identical missions.

Significantly, however, they share fundamental values, which may be expressed as follows:

- All young people deserve housing which is safe, stable and affordable
- Close permanent, positive relationships between youth and caring adults are critical to healthy development and can protect against homelessness
- Despite trauma, economic disadvantage and limited opportunities, youth and young adults show remarkable resiliency and can do well, especially with appropriate supports and services
- The well-being of this population cannot be separated from macro-economic factors impacting the job and housing markets. In many communities young people, especially those with poor academic records and limited work experience, simply cannot earn enough to secure and maintain decent housing

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- The current situation – high numbers of young people leaving foster care and soon (sometimes immediately!) entering the homelessness system – is unacceptable.

In addition to complementary values, the systems work towards similar outcomes and goals, although in most instances they do so independently. For example, in the work of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the USICH we see desired outcomes for young people matching up well:

| <b>Jim Casey Initiative Youth Outcomes</b> | <b>USICH</b>                |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Permanence                                 | Stable Housing              |
| Employment                                 | Permanent Connections       |
| Social capital                             | Education or employment     |
| Health                                     | Social-emotional well being |
| Education                                  |                             |
| Housing                                    |                             |
| Financial capability                       |                             |

These and other factors, and the leadership of key individuals and organizations, may provide new opportunities to break down walls and increase the effectiveness of all services and supports for youth and young adults.

### System Changes are Already Underway

Many states are taking advantage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections) provisions allowing federal financial participation for youth in care up to age 21. While most observers believe that extending care is not a panacea for preventing homelessness, the additional years could provide an extended window for the child welfare agencies to provide services and placement options that will help youth achieve stable housing (not just “do more of the same”).<sup>20</sup>

Some youth are able to use the extension period to great advantage. Young people enrolled in extended care tend to continue longer with college and become more financially stable.<sup>21</sup> Those in Illinois who were still getting foster care services at age 19 were less likely to have been arrested. Foster children in Illinois, which has long allowed youth to remain in care until their 21st birthday, were more likely to have completed at least one year of college than their counterparts from Iowa or Wisconsin, where age of emancipation at the time was 18.<sup>22 23</sup>

Despite the Fostering Connections requirement that case planning be youth-directed, implementation of this practice is only now beginning in most jurisdictions. Youth directed case planning, along with a movement towards permanence, represent large scale and fundamental changes occurring in child welfare philosophy and practice.

The issue of youth homelessness gained national prominence when USICH published its Framework to End Youth Homelessness.<sup>24</sup> USICH has provided new thinking and leadership in recent years. The overarching USICH strategies focus on system building efforts and include a data strategy to get to better data on the numbers and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness, and a capacity strategy to strengthen and coordinate the

20. Dworsky, A. Reducing the Risk of Homelessness among Youth Aging Out of Care. Chapin Hall. PowerPoint presentation at the National Alliance to End Homelessness. July 23, 2013

21. Jones, L. *I Want To Get Out: Teens Rarely Extend Foster Care When Given Choice*. KUOW News. November 13, 2013.

22. Winerip, M. *Out of Foster Care, Into College*. The New York Times. October 30, 2013

23. Courtney, et al.

24. Framework to End Youth Homelessness: A Resource Text for Dialogue and Action United States Interagency Council on Homelessness February 2013



capacity of federal, state, and local systems to act effectively and efficiently toward ending youth homelessness. Work related to each of these strategies is categorized within three phases: I.) activities that can begin immediately; II.) activities that will require new resources; and III.) longer term activities that build on earlier efforts and may require new resources and/or legislative authority. USICH has also recommended the adoption of an “Unaccompanied Youth Intervention Model” containing new approaches that are multi-faceted and comprehensive. The model (see Appendix A of A Framework to End Youth Homelessness) weaves together youth development principles, risk and protective factors, and trauma informed care. Each of these is familiar and supported in the child welfare world as well, which may make greater system integration feasible. Relatively new thinking in the homeless world is also evidenced by the prominence of “Housing First” and “Rapid Re-housing” approaches.

Still, the child welfare/social service fields and the homelessness/housing fields are often on parallel tracks, with each operating in their own sphere, with many of the same young people but in different parts of their lives and at different times. With both the child welfare and homelessness systems undergoing exciting periods of re-definition, an unusual opportunity for joint actions and learning may exist.

## Challenges Ahead

The availability of safe, stable and affordable housing is a critically important factor in the transition to adulthood. In addition to meeting basic human needs for shelter, safe and reliable housing serves as a “platform” that promotes positive outcomes across a range of domains from education to employment to physical and mental health. Housing stability is especially important during the transition to adulthood because of its relationship to safety and self-sufficiency.

More effective responses to youth homelessness would be characterized by services that are:

1. Better coordinated, linking multiple agencies and systems
2. More focused on prevention and permanence
3. Built on youth-driven comprehensive plans

It is vital that, at national, state and local levels, special efforts be made to build bridges between the child welfare, housing and homeless systems. Greater coordination is needed if impactful services are to become the norm. This transition will not be easy or quick. The gulf between the systems is so wide that administrators, practitioners, policy advocates, funders and others committed to change will first need to learn each others’ language, systems and limitations.

## Enhance Service Delivery Coordination

The child welfare/social services system is not mandated to provide services beyond an upper age limit – most often 18-21. On the other hand, housing and homeless agencies are rarely engaged with youth while in foster care, although many give indications of being at risk of homelessness well before emancipation. Given their common goals and concerns, the systems should work more closely together to provide services that make differences in day to day practice and prevent homelessness.

The Fostering Connections Act requires child welfare agencies to begin planning with young people long before they leave foster care. It is critical that these planning efforts be youth-led and involve family members and/or others at the youth’s discretion. In the child welfare system youth directed case planning is at the heart of a youth-adult partnership leading to a successful transition to adulthood.



Among the issues to be discussed in planning sessions are educational aspirations, career choice, and future living arrangement. In some instances, practical alternatives for safe, stable and affordable housing are difficult to find. In a more integrated service delivery system, the child welfare agency would consult with the housing and/or homeless agencies to identify available support, guidance and resources long before homelessness becomes a reality.

Today the homeless system responds when young people are already homeless, or nearly so. Shouldn't the child welfare system, seeing homelessness coming up ahead, anticipate the problem and join with the homelessness/housing agencies to access expertise and resources to address homelessness before it occurs?

Similarly, the child welfare agency has the expertise and resources to find family resources for young people, at any age, and the skills and resources needed to successfully unite families. In a reformed system, new and expanded child welfare resources could be accessed, in coordination with homeless providers, to provide these services to young adults well beyond their 21st birthday.

Rather than operating in separate worlds, rather than a division of responsibility, based on age and status, there would be value in an intentional overlap in responsibilities with resources brought to bear that align with the young person's needs and aspirations. The overlap would not be an instance of duplication. Rather it would expand the scope of both systems with each bringing unique skills, experience and resources.

Many communities are already working to pull multiple service delivery systems together. For example, the King County (Washington) homeless youth initiative puts a premium on organizing providers, bundling services, and personalizing delivery for a youthful clientele. The Homeless Youth and Young Adult Initiative has joined efforts with the Committee to End Homelessness to turn fragmented homeless programs into well-targeted, economical continuums of care. It is promoting agency coordination, fostering program improvements, collecting relevant data, and marshaling and directing funds necessary to drive change.

## Focus on Prevention and Permanency

Across systems and fields we should commit to preventing homelessness, in addition to responding to it. Successful prevention would reduce the demand for homeless services and reduce the need for increasing the supply of beds. A "return on investment" case might be made for the savings generated by preventing homelessness and/or shortening its duration.

The value of permanent adult relationships does not diminish on an 18th birthday. **Permanency is forever**, despite a tendency to discount it for older youth and young adults. All service systems should set a high priority on including, strengthening and supporting nuclear and extended families. Increased help for families at key moments can reduce the demand for both foster care and homeless services. Feeling close to at least one adult family member reduced the odds of homelessness by age 19 by more than half.<sup>25</sup>

The purest instance of preventing homelessness comes as a result of strengthening families and family ties. Unfortunately agencies and individuals too often take narrow views of permanence. Too often it is seen only in the context of a legal status, or a path to adoption and so less fruitful for older youth and young adults. For young people ages 18 to 24, who fall into transitional subpopulation, connection with family and caring adults is itself a positive outcome. Family finding and other connection activities can be valuable for all young people regardless of whether they will be able to return to live with their families. Family, community, and peer connections that provide a natural support system for young people should be a priority for all programs working with youth and

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25. Housing for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: A Review of the Literature and Program Typology. Dworsky, A., et al. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development & Research, April 2012.



young adults, independent of a young person's final housing designation.

Increased help for nuclear or extended families can greatly reduce the demand for both foster care and homeless services. Helping the family improve its own health, housing or economic circumstances can help them care for their child, niece, or grandchild who might otherwise be homeless.

The child welfare and homeless systems are disconnected and their separation is dysfunctional. In the normal course of events there is no overlap or sharing of responsibility, no opportunity to co-own results or be held accountable for them. That a youth in foster care may be at great risk of becoming homeless after foster care benefits are exhausted, must be known by social workers in many cases. Yet there is little history of system collaboration and service coordination..

Instead, the young person formerly in foster care arrives at the homeless system's door (often literally a shelter door) with little or no advance planning. A young person who should have been seen as likely to experience homelessness, months or years in advance, arrives unexpectedly in the new system just as the old system closes its case.

## Comprehensive Services

It is now clearly recognized that the foster care and homeless systems are linked in many ways. Large percentages of young people leaving foster care experience homelessness while large percentages of the homeless have had some experience in foster care.

Although they are often seen as a group, the young people that make up the foster care population come from diverse backgrounds, have different aspirations and a wide range of life stories. Some will be in or headed for college or other post-secondary education. Some have ongoing relationships with their families, while others are estranged. Young people who have experienced poverty, trauma and/or engagement with public child welfare or juvenile justice systems will likely have marked developmental differences when compared to their peers who have not had such experiences.

For these reasons and others it is critical to treat each individual instance of youth homelessness as unique. There is no one-size-fits-all intervention, no magic bullet program that will be effective for all young people. No one sector of our society, no single service delivery system or approach will be sufficient to address this problem. As with other issues facing disconnected young people, only coordinated and concerted action at the federal, state, local and personal level is likely to consistently bring improved results.

Each young person's unique circumstances demands an individualized array of services to meet their needs, increase their protective factors, and reduce their risk factors, in order to ultimately improve outcomes in the areas of housing, permanent connections, education, employment, health and well-being. These services could include individualized case management, support reuniting or reconnecting with parents or other family members, short-term emergency housing, mental health services, substance abuse services, or educational services. To meet these individual needs, a full array of culturally and developmentally appropriate services should be deployed and aligned across providers so that young people do not fall through the cracks.

To deliver high quality, integrated services requires a network of cross-sector services and supports quite unlike what most communities have today. Multiple services cannot be effectively delivered unless they are a part of a closely knit and coordinated service delivery system. In today's system, resources are inadequate and inflexible; governed by artificial age or eligibility factors. Incentives for reducing youth homelessness are absent, as is accountability for results.

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Far from being supportive and encouraging, today's systems are difficult to navigate and rife with perverse incentives. For example, young people have to go to a shelter to be "officially" designated as homeless and eligible for US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) services; must not leave foster care before their 18th birthday or will/may lose eligibility for services, supports; must have a mental health diagnosis to be eligible; can go to the top of the list if pregnant or parenting; lose eligibility for extended care benefits if they work too much; etc.

Young people can best be served in systems that are committed to principles of positive youth development. In such a framework youth are seen as assets to their communities rather than liabilities. A positive youth development approach celebrates their successes, credits their resilience and assures that their voice is heard and valued. Adults plan with, not for, young people whether in their own life-planning or in community matters.

Service systems should offer choices of setting, services and plans and help young people find the situation that best meets their needs. The Fostering Connections requirement for youth directed planning will challenge service providers and systems to learn and adopt new ways of doing business.

Service systems should be designed that allow young people room to change their minds, to fail, to learn from their mistakes and do better next time. All should expect that not all plans will work well or that even good plans will not last forever. Adolescence and young adulthood are times of learning, and a great deal of life learning is by trial and error.

Building and maintaining the kind of systems described will require new and more complex thinking about the relationships between individual services and service providers, groups of services, the work going on in separate fields and the cumulative impact of seemingly unrelated services. After decades of talking about collaboration, service integration and collective impact the many systems are still narrowly defined.

For example, young people with a solid educational background, with a good job, steady income, and strong family support systems rarely wind up in the homeless system. Although not often recognized as such, services targeted to employment, education, and permanence, if successful, can individually impact and lessen the demand for homeless services. Rarely, however are they thought of in this way and their collateral contributions are not credited.

We need to think of permanence, education, employment, and building social capital not only as entities unto themselves, but also as a web of services and supports that together serve to prevent homelessness and a wide range of other negative outcomes.

Working and thinking comprehensively will require new skills, learning about different populations, new tools, and all applied under unfamiliar circumstances. Common training at all levels that stresses brain research; trauma informed services; building partnerships between youth and adults; all built on youth development principles and anchored in youth directed case planning and self advocacy is needed.

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## ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

The value of permanent adult relationships does not automatically diminish on an 18th birthday. **Permanency is forever**, despite a tendency to discount it for older youth and young adults. All service systems should set a high priority on including, strengthening and supporting nuclear and extended families. Increased help for families at key moments can reduce the demand for both foster care and homeless services. **What works to build/re-build the families of young adults? When, if ever, is too late? Do homeless agencies have the mandate and resources to reunite families? Are child welfare agencies able to reach young adults over 21? What are the opportunities in your community or organization advance the goal of permanency? What linkages can you help make?**

The homelessness and child welfare fields must increase their work together, along with education, mental health, employment. Cross training of service provider agency staff would foster greater understanding and mutual support. **Is there a real chance of systems working closely together? Is this a naïve fantasy? What stands in the way? What can be done to cross boundaries, build working coalitions, change practice? What are the opportunities in your community or organization for greater collaboration? What linkages can you help make?**

Young people can best be served in systems that are committed to principles of **positive youth development**. In such a framework young people are seen as assets to their communities rather than liabilities. Such a system celebrates their successes, credits their resilience and assures that youth voice is heard and valued. Adults plan with, not for, young people whether in their own life-planning or in community matters. Working with young adults (18-21) is new to many in child welfare agencies. **What is being learned about youth-driven decision-making? Are systems prepared to let young people fail; and offer second chances? Take risks? How can support be provided to young adults that does not feel like excessive control? What are the opportunities in your community or organization to advance positive youth development principles? What linkages can you help make?**

More effectively helping homeless young people and those at risk of homelessness will require systems to stretch their skills and broaden their scope. **What resources would be needed to allow child welfare agencies to serve young adults beyond 21? To allow homelessness staff to work with youth in the child welfare system before 18, before homelessness occurs? Are greater resources needed? For what? From where? Is it possible the systems could advocate for reforms and resources together? What are the opportunities in your community or organization for collaborative advocacy? What linkages can you help make?**

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## About the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

The mission of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is to ensure that young people—primarily those between the ages of 14 and 25—make successful transitions from foster care to adulthood. We do this by working nationally, in states, and locally to improve policies and practices, promote youth engagement, apply evaluation and research, and create community partnerships. Our work creates opportunities for young people to achieve positive outcomes in permanence, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital.



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