



# **THE JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE: 25 Years of Impact for Older Youth Who Have Experienced Foster Care**



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

### **About the Annie E. Casey Foundation**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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**For 25 years, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® has helped transform how our country supports young people with foster care experience. It has demonstrated that when we invest in young people's strengths, listen to their voices and surround them with the relationships, resources and opportunities they need, they can thrive and lead.**

The Jim Casey Initiative has brought together the very best of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It has built one of the field's strongest bodies of evidence about the experiences of young people transitioning from foster care, helping policymakers, practitioners and funders better understand the challenges they face and the investments that make the greatest difference. It has shown what authentic youth engagement really looks like by recognizing young people's lived experience as expertise and making them true partners in shaping policies, programs and solutions. And it has served as a platform for innovation, pioneering approaches that continue to influence the field — from Opportunity Passport®, which has helped young people build financial capability and assets, to applying adolescent brain science to policy and practice, to the SOUL Family framework, which is redefining permanency by helping young people build lifelong legal relationships with caring adults.

None of this would have been possible without the extraordinary commitment of leaders in sites across the country. They have spent years building trusted relationships with young people, championing their success and working alongside them to develop, test and spread new ideas that have strengthened communities and transformed systems.

The Jim Casey Initiative also changed the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It helped deepen our understanding of adolescence and modeled what authentic partnership with young people can and should look like.

Over the past five years alone, Jim Casey Fellows have contributed their insights and expertise to more than 250

Foundation projects and activities — informing research and data analysis, shaping publications and trainings, facilitating convenings and strengthening youth-adult partnerships across child welfare and beyond.

The lessons we've learned from these young people continue to shape our work today. Supporting adolescents and young adults is no longer the responsibility of one team or portfolio; it is a Foundation-wide priority — from our Thrive by 25® commitment to the way we partner with communities across the country on juvenile justice reform, workforce development, gun violence prevention and other issues affecting young people.

Together, these accomplishments reflect Jim Casey's enduring vision. As we celebrate this milestone, we also celebrate his belief that every young person deserves the opportunity to succeed, no matter the circumstances they face. We believe he would be enormously proud of what this initiative has accomplished — and of the dedicated staff, partners and, especially, the young people whose leadership, courage and ideas have driven this work forward.

The past 25 years have shown us what is possible when we trust young people, invest in their potential and have the courage to challenge outdated systems. The data, and the young people themselves, also tell us there is more work to do.

Now it is up to all of us to build on this legacy so every young person with foster care experience has the support, stability, well-being and lifelong connections they need to thrive.

As we mark this anniversary, we invite lived experts, practitioners, partners and policymakers to help shape that future with us.

**Lisa Lawson**  
President and CEO  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

**Sandra Gasca**  
Vice President, Center for Systems Innovation  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

**Leslie Gross**  
Director, Family Well-Being Strategy Group  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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## Realizing Jim Casey's Legacy: From Vision to Movement

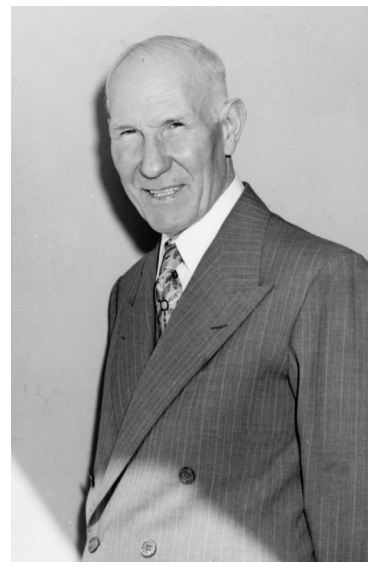
Twenty-five years ago, most young people left care at age 18 with no legal family, few resources, no housing plan and minimal preparation for adult life. Not surprisingly, this group faced staggering challenges: homelessness, unemployment, lack of education, involvement with the criminal justice system and limited economic opportunities to build a stable future.

As early as the 1980s, young people who had experienced foster care began to organize to demand changes in child welfare systems. In 1985, nine young people sued the state of New York, which was discharging young people from foster care unprepared to survive on their own. Tragically, one of the plaintiffs, Willie Palmer, who had been discharged from foster care at age 18 with only a trash bag of belongings, died a violent death while trying to survive on the streets. Palmer's death and the case sparked a national movement and helped spur policy changes nationwide.

In 1999, Congress passed the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act to increase dedicated resources for young people who age out of care. As the movement to support the transition of young people aging out of foster care advanced and states began to consider how best to implement the Chafee Act, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs created the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®, with a singular focus on ensuring young people ages 14 to 26 who experience foster care have the relationships, resources and opportunities needed to thrive. The initiative is named for Jim Casey, the founder of UPS and both foundations, whose own experience of hardship during childhood and lifelong commitment to young people's potential inspired this work. Today, the Jim Casey Initiative endures as a network of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and a strategy to improve systems that informs and shapes the Foundation's commitment to building a brighter future for all teenagers and young adults.

From the beginning, the Jim Casey Initiative made a deep and innovative commitment to the practice of [authentic youth engagement](#): not only by offering young people a seat at the table, but also by putting their experiences at the heart of the work and ensuring they participated in decisions. Over time, the initiative cultivated the practice into a model that provided a powerful engine for all its efforts and a robust national capacity-building strategy that has set new standards to elevate the leadership of young people with foster care experience. Along the way, young people worked hand in hand with adults to achieve major policy and practice wins.

**In 2001, 265,000 older youth were in foster care and 18,000 young people aged out without permanent connections to caring adults, most at age 18.<sup>1</sup>**



***Determined people working  
together can do anything.***

**– Jim Casey**

Over the past 25 years, the Jim Casey Initiative became an influential national network. Partner sites practice authentic youth engagement by convening and supporting youth-led boards and councils, supporting leadership training, delivering essential services and building pathways for youth to succeed. With young leaders as co-design partners, many sites have developed specialties in housing assistance, career preparation, financial capacity and educational advancement. Currently, 16 Jim Casey Initiative Network partner sites — private nonprofit and public agencies, universities, policy organizations and community-based organizations — serve thousands of young people ages 14 to 26 and work to improve policies and practices that affect thousands more. Seven additional jurisdictions are working toward the goal of joining the network.

The influence driven by its youth engagement approach has extended well beyond sites participating in the initiative. Youth engagement is now an expectation in child welfare systems. New financial capability programs help young people build savings and assets. Advancements in the understanding of adolescent brain science and trauma and notable changes in federal law continue to spur improvements to better support older youth, and data about this population are being used to inform decision-making.

Since 2001, the Jim Casey Initiative and its network have:

- leveraged more than **\$1.3 billion in private and government investments** to support older youth;
- increased visibility for this population, leading to improved policies and practices;
- grown young people's financial capability through its flagship [Opportunity Passport®](#), a matched savings program that has **enabled young people to invest more than \$32 million in purchases tied to their life goals** — such as buying a car for school and work, paying tuition or renting an apartment — and resulted in more than **22,500 young people receiving financial education**;
- **trained hundreds of young leaders** to use their voices to advocate for themselves and their peers;
- built the **longest-running and most comprehensive dataset on older youth** who have experienced foster care;
- **achieved more than 400 state policy and practice wins<sup>2</sup>** that have improved resources and opportunities for older youth; and
- had powerful ripple effects on countless leaders and organizations across the country working to improve outcomes for older youth who experienced foster care.

This brief tracks four connected areas of accomplishment: positive outcomes for young people, including progress in their ability to earn, save and invest in goals; data capacity and accountability that shines a light on how young people leaving foster care are doing; policy and practice improvements at the state and national levels; and ripple effects that have built leadership and influence across the country.

## The Jim Casey Initiative's Best Practices and Key Approaches

To reach its North Star, the Jim Casey Initiative focuses on creating opportunities for young people to form permanent family connections, experience stable housing, achieve positive outcomes in education, become economically secure and make informed decisions about parenting. From the beginning, it was clear that achieving this goal would mean leaders needed to work in fundamentally different ways. The following best practices guide the initiative's work.

- **Engage young people** in the decisions that shape their lives, including the design of policies and practices in systems that serve them.
- **Prioritize strategies and solutions that improve outcomes for young people so that all can thrive**, especially those who are disproportionately represented in foster care and facing the greatest need and steepest climb to stability as they transition to adulthood.
- **Leverage public, private and community partners across sectors** to align efforts and develop resources for youth.
- **Use data, evaluation and storytelling** to inform decisions, measure progress and improve outcomes.
- **Build public will and improve policies** that sustain enhancements over time.

Initiative leaders also employ strategic approaches that have propelled the network in fundamental ways, such as:

- **Elevating and applying adolescent brain research to improve policy and practice.** The initiative played a seminal role in translating and applying adolescent development research to child welfare policy and practice. This research reframed adolescence as a time of opportunity, advancing the understanding that brain development continues well into a young person's mid-20s and that young people have unique developmental needs that require scaffolding and support. This research contributed to critical policy reforms, including extending the age of eligibility for support, and practice improvements focused on youth engagement and leadership, belonging, identity and consistent relationships with caring adults.

### RESULT

**The Jim Casey Initiative works to ensure that young people ages 14 to 26 in the United States who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday have the relationships, resources and opportunities to achieve well-being and success.**

- **Incubating and demonstrating innovation in policy and practice.** The sites that make up the network have been a significant source of innovation. Together, they form a powerful community for generating, testing and refining new approaches that have advanced nationally. This network structure enabled the initiative to innovate, learn, adjust and scale at a much faster pace than otherwise would have been possible.
- **Nurturing relationships and connection.** Site leaders often note the value of the depth of relationships they have formed with those in similar roles in other sites. These trusted relationships provided opportunities for peer learning and problem solving, accelerated learning in each individual site and supported scaling of innovative approaches.
- **Adopting a learning stance to grow and evolve.** The initiative's strategies and approaches have evolved over time based on collective learning, examination of data and modifications from network leaders, partners and, most importantly, young people.



## Young People at the Center: Driving Change With Authentic Youth Engagement

When the Jim Casey Initiative launched in 2001, youth-led organizing and youth advisory groups were already emerging in several states, but investing deeply in young people as partners in systems change was still a radical notion within child welfare.

From the beginning, the initiative made strong commitments to ensuring that young people with foster care experience had meaningful opportunities to influence the systems that affected their lives and to investing in the relationships, support and leadership development that made their authentic partnership possible. The approach — now known as authentic youth engagement — was not yet a defined framework. It evolved as young people and site partners tested new ways of working together and the initiative committed to learning from, investing in and spreading what was working across the network.

Today, authentic youth engagement means more than inviting young people to attend a one-off meeting or provide their stamp of approval. It means treating knowledge drawn from personal experience in foster care as expertise, sharing decision-making and partnering with young people to assess, design and implement policies, programs and practices.

The initiative distilled this learning into [\*A Framework for Effectively Partnering With Young People\*](#).<sup>3</sup> Authentic youth engagement became a philosophical cornerstone and grew over time into a best practice of the initiative, shaping its continuum of leadership opportunities for young people and strengthening the capacity and approaches of system leaders and community partners to support young leaders in system reform.

### CREATING NEW LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS AND INCREASING THE NUMBER OF YOUNG LEADERS

Leaning into youth engagement as a best practice and deepening investment over time, network sites created and strengthened local structures for youth leadership — and the number of young leaders engaged in child welfare system reform efforts grew dramatically. At the national level also, the initiative supported the growth, expansion and refinement of youth engagement practices, including new pathways for development. From this grew the Youth Leadership Institute, a weeklong, immersive experience designed to build transferable skills in areas such as advocacy, policy and data while also creating space for connection, reflection and growth. After completing the Youth Leadership Institute and working on local systems-change projects, participants become eligible to apply for the Jim Casey Fellowship to continue their leadership journey, contributing to local and national efforts. Today, the Jim Casey Fellows, more than 150 strong, are leaders in their communities and the child welfare field.

*I appreciate the adult partners who gave me the “professional hug” to uplift my strengths and create opportunities to lead as a lived expert. That is unique to the Jim Casey Initiative. At every step of the journey, there was always someone who saw me and my value and had conversations with me about opportunities to continue growing in my leadership through new roles.*

– Patricia Chin  
HI H.O.P.E.S. Statewide Initiative  
Manager, EPIC ‘Ohana, and Jim  
Casey Fellow

Alongside the evolution of leadership pathways, the Jim Casey Initiative created structures for collaborative decision-making, notably the Advisory Committee, a dedicated table for Foundation staff to partner with fellows. Since its creation in 2015, 45 Jim Casey Fellows have served on the Advisory Committee. Over the past five years, fellows have partnered with the Foundation on more than 250 national projects. They have served as co-authors of publications, codesigned convenings, facilitated workshops, served on issue-based working groups, and designed and delivered technical assistance to partner organizations.

Youth engagement opportunities also serve as a springboard to other leadership roles and expanded professional connections. Jim Casey Fellows are now working as site leads in the network, entrepreneurs, social workers, policy advocates, nonprofit leaders and foster parents themselves. As young leaders grow and move into new careers and roles, they rely on the connections, expertise and support of these friends and colleagues. The initiative has always emphasized that they are whole individuals with insights, skills and aspirations that extend beyond their firsthand experience in foster care. Young leaders often describe the Jim Casey Initiative as a place of belonging where their promise is recognized and where they are seen, valued and supported.

## AT A GLANCE: BUILDING YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

| PATHWAY                                    | PURPOSE AND REACH                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Youth boards and councils</b>           | Beginning in 2002, local youth boards created forums for young people to guide Jim Casey Initiative partner site priorities, advocate for themselves and shape policy and practice.                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Youth Leadership Institute</b>          | Launched in 2005, the weeklong institute builds skills in advocacy, child welfare policy, data and storytelling while creating space for connection, reflection and growth. More than 400 young people have participated.                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Jim Casey Fellowship</b>                | More than 150 young people have continued their leadership through the fellowship, contributing to local, state and national work. Some also participate in the Advanced Youth Leadership Institute for additional hands-on experience. Jim Casey Fellows have partnered with the Casey Foundation on more than 250 national projects during the past five years. |
| <b>Advanced Youth Leadership Institute</b> | Jim Casey Fellows advance their leadership knowledge and skills through hands-on professional projects of their choosing, supported by a national or local partner.                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Advisory Committee</b>                  | Created in 2015, as the nonprofit Jim Casey Initiative became integrated into the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the committee provides a dedicated structure for fellows and Foundation staff to make decisions together. Forty-five fellows have served.                                                                                                            |

The work continues to evolve. As new generations of young people bring fresh perspectives and expectations for how they engage with systems, and as leaders with firsthand experience take on roles across child welfare, the initiative remains committed to learning alongside them, adapting its approaches and continuing to deepen authentic engagement.

## INFLUENCING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Youth engagement strategies supported and helped to unleash the power of young people to influence policy and practice in transformative ways, both at the site level and nationally. Young people have had meaningful roles in nearly three-quarters of the 413 state policy and practice improvements achieved by the initiative and its partner sites since 2013, including developing youth-led grievance processes, creating tuition waivers for youth who have experienced foster care, extending foster care beyond age 18, establishing sibling visitation rights and expanding Medicaid eligibility to age 26. Young leaders have also influenced countless federal laws impacting older youth. As a result of national advocacy efforts, state child welfare agencies are now required to engage young people with foster care experience in creating state Child and Family Services (Title IV-B) plans for federal child welfare funding.

## THE SOUL FAMILY FRAMEWORK

The creation of the SOUL Family framework represents a powerful contribution of the Jim Casey Initiative's Advisory Committee (ACOMM) and a key example of youth-driven design. After extensive review of national data about the legal pathways for older youth to exit foster care with a supportive family — permanency options including reunifying with their birth family, adoption and guardianship — ACOMM concluded that another alternative was needed to address the complexities of their lives and relationships and to meet their unique needs. In partnership with adult allies and experts across the field, these young people took the lead to build a framework for a new permanency pathway that they later named the SOUL Family framework. SOUL stands for support, opportunity, unity and legal relationships. The framework enables jurisdictions to build a permanency pathway that includes a circle of caring adults, allows young people to maintain biological relationships, provides young people with access to necessary support services and financial assistance, and puts young people in the driver's seat to direct their own futures. The Annie E. Casey Foundation currently invests in demonstration sites to implement the SOUL Family framework, to support a learning community of jurisdictions and to develop implementation resources and technical assistance that will help jurisdictions improve older youth permanency. In 2024, Kansas passed legislation to become the first state to implement the SOUL Family framework; as of this writing, at least 60 young people have achieved permanency through this option. The District of Columbia approved a new legal permanency option based on the SOUL Family framework in August 2026.

*My involvement with Jim Casey has influenced how I show up in other professional spaces. In my workplace, now as a boss, I practice some of the things I learned here. ... [The initiative] taught me to care about the person, not just the employee role they fill. I felt seen in this space, so now as a manager, I get to incorporate that in my management style and do that for others!*

### - Kai Saga

Executive Director of the Metanoia Project, a shelter and resource hub for homeless people in Cleveland, Ohio, and Jim Casey Fellow

## INFLUENCING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE BROADER FIELD

To spread its youth engagement best practices, the Jim Casey Initiative also invested in convenings and in developing and disseminating resources. In 2014, the initiative hosted the National Summit on Authentic Youth Engagement, the largest of its kind with more than 400 participants from across 36 states. Through the initiative's Youth Engagement Summit in 2021, teams from 27 jurisdictions built new youth engagement capacity and created clear action plans to advance their work. Recently, the Jim Casey Initiative and site partners developed [Elevating Youth Engagement](#), a curriculum that provides practical, step-by-step lessons for child welfare professionals and young people to partner effectively.

As the Jim Casey Initiative's standards and expectations for youth engagement evolved, organizations in the field were inspired to deepen their own partnership work with young adults. Many foundations and funder networks, including the Youth Transition Funders Group, adopted similar standards and expectations in their grantmaking and approaches to partnership with young people. The initiative also influenced nonprofits across the country to invest in and prioritize youth engagement strategies. For example, Child Trends, a national research and evaluation firm, created Youth Research Advisors to help inform and guide their work.

## STRENGTHENING THE VISION AND MISSION OF THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Jim Casey Initiative's model of authentic youth engagement significantly influenced the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its work on behalf of all children. The importance and value of authentic partnership with young people involved in child welfare spread across the organization and began to inform other aspects of the Foundation's work.

For example, in 2016, the Foundation launched the Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)<sup>™</sup> initiative to support education and career success for young people who experienced child welfare and juvenile justice systems, modeled on many of the best practices of the Jim Casey Initiative, including authentic youth engagement. Also, Jim Casey Fellows and learnings from their programs helped inform the Foundation's Rising Leaders for Results Fellowship, which supports emerging leaders ages 24 to 31 in sharpening their leadership skills.

Over time, lessons from the Jim Casey Initiative about adolescent development and the relationships, resources and opportunities young people need helped shape and define [Thrive by 25®](#), the Foundation-wide commitment to young people ages 14 to 24. Supporting adolescents and young adults is now a priority shared across the Foundation.

*The Jim Casey Fellowship is designed with a “once a fellow, always a fellow” culture. The people in the network poured into me through relationship, grace and consistency and provided opportunities to refine my skills as an advocate. Those are the same skills that I use today. The right support, at the right time, with the right people opened up so many opportunities. Now as a site lead, I put a lot of intentionality into supporting young people in a way that elevates and validates their truth.*

### – Kayla Powell

Youth Development Coordinator  
for the Iowa Department of Human  
Rights, Co-Lead of Iowa's Jim  
Casey Initiative Network Site  
Partnership, and Jim Casey Fellow



## What the Initiative Has Achieved for Young People, Practice and Policy

The Jim Casey Initiative's efforts over the past 25 years have led to positive outcomes for thousands of young people who have experienced foster care, as well as significant improvements in policy, practice, data capacity and resources.

### 1 Young People in the Jim Casey Initiative Network Are Better Off: The Opportunity Passport Story

Shortly after its inception, the Jim Casey Initiative created Opportunity Passport, a financial education and matched savings intervention addressing young people's need to learn and practice financial decision-making as they transitioned from foster care to adulthood. The idea for Opportunity Passport was inspired by the research of the [American Dream Demonstration Project](#), which tested Individual Development Accounts (matched savings accounts) to help families who have low incomes build financial assets. Michael Sherraden, a nationally recognized scholar of social policy and asset building for children and families with low incomes, advised the initiative on how to apply some of the lessons from the research to its young people.

As the first-of-its-kind national asset-building strategy developed to support young people transitioning from foster care, Opportunity Passport provides financial education; coaching support for setting financial goals and opening and using a bank account; and savings matches for young people's developmentally appropriate purchases, such as a car to get to work, a deposit for a first apartment or college tuition. Gaining experience in financial capability helps young people develop budgeting, saving and money management skills for a lifetime and builds a pathway to economic security. Since 2003:

- **more than 22,500** young people received financial education through the *Keys to Your Financial Future* curriculum;
- **over 6,800** young people who saved made **16,300** developmentally appropriate purchases to further their life goals; and
- the young people have **invested \$32.2 million** in combined savings and matches in approved purchases, as of December 2025.

The ability to manage and accelerate their savings contributed powerfully to a positive trajectory. Opportunity Passport participants who save and invest report better outcomes than peers who do not.

*There aren't enough spaces where the expectations are high, but we are also accepted for who we are at the moment. [The initiative] encourages us to be who we are with emotions and personal needs. We get to be a leader where humanness is respected.*

– **Aly Leonard**  
Coordinator, Commission on Improving the Status of Children, Indiana Supreme Court, and Jim Casey Fellow

For example, participants who purchase:

- a vehicle have **1.6 times** higher odds of reporting employment and **2.8 times** higher odds of reporting adequate transportation for school and work;
- an education asset have **2.8 times** higher odds of reporting being in school; and
- a housing asset have **1.4 times** higher odds of reporting stable housing.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Opportunity Passport participants achieve higher rates of educational attainment and employment and report lower rates of disconnection than their peers who experienced foster care.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 New Data Capacity Drives Decision-Making and Accountability

From the early days, the Jim Casey Initiative recognized that the lack of state and national data on this population of young people was an obstacle to advancing policies and improving outcomes. The initiative invested in Chapin Hall's Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, a first-of-its-kind longitudinal study of young people in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin led by scholar Mark Courtney. It surveyed young people from 2002 until 2011.

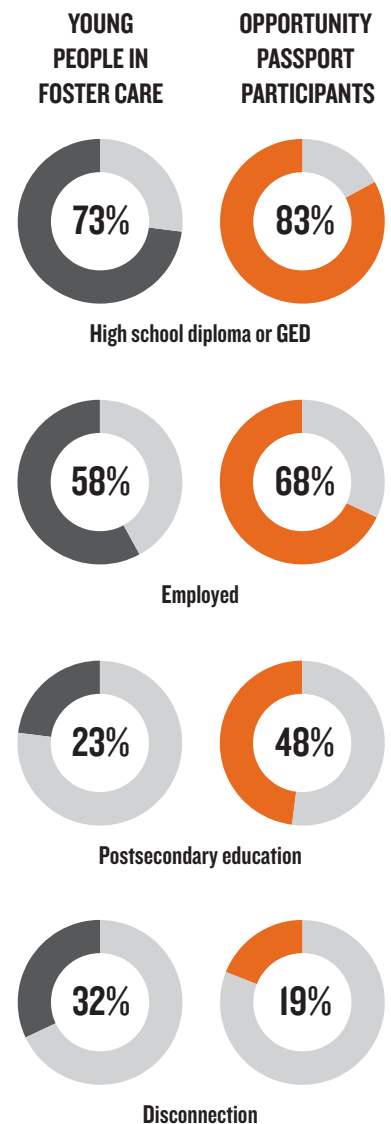
At the same time, the Jim Casey Initiative invested in building data and evaluation tools that would provide critical information about the needs of young people and the effectiveness of the initiative. National researchers, practitioners and young people guided the development of the Opportunity Passport Participant Survey, which began collecting information in 2003. This survey, administered twice a year, tracks demographics, parenting, foster care history and information on permanent relationships, housing, education, employment, transportation access, financial capability, and physical and mental health. The initiative also provides technical assistance and support to ensure partner sites have the necessary capacity to collect and analyze their data.

These efforts disproved the long-held notion that it would be too difficult to collect data from young people over time. Sites consistently hit an 80% response rate for the Opportunity Passport Participant Survey. In 2016, they set a record 87% response rate across the initiative. To date, young people have completed more than 100,000 surveys, and this comprehensive longitudinal database informs policy and practice improvements and guides investments across the country to meet young people's needs.

The initiative's data and evaluation investments led to other improvements in the field, including the creation of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), the federal data system required by the Chafee Program. The Jim Casey Initiative's work informed how NYTD outcomes were selected, and the initiative's technical guidance helped states develop their NYTD infrastructure.

The Jim Casey Initiative's data capacity was also a powerful tool for its policy work. Starting in 2018, the Annie E. Casey Foundation began using these data

### Young people in Opportunity Passport fare better compared to the general population of young people in foster care



SOURCES: National Youth in Transition Database, Cohort 4, Wave 3 (Age 21 in fiscal year 2024); Opportunity Passport Participant Survey, Age 21 in 2024<sup>v</sup>

resources to create a series of [Fostering Youth Transitions](#) briefs and state profiles to help state leaders better understand their NYTD data and to support policy campaigns such as [Journey to Success](#). Most recently, the initiative has made the data available to 16 research institutions to use a subset of the information for scholarship and ongoing learning.

## **3 Policy and Practice Improvements Support Young People in New and Better Ways**

The Jim Casey Initiative set out with clear aspirations to influence policy and practice at the site and national levels. Early investments served to increase public awareness and build public will through national campaigns, publications, convenings and Capitol Hill briefings. These efforts were later strengthened by the expanded datasets that the initiative created and influenced and the growing leadership of young advocates.

### **THE POWER OF PLACE: SITE-LEVEL INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PRACTICE**

Each Jim Casey Initiative partner site drives innovations in policy and practice that have expanded resources, relationships and opportunities for young people leaving care. In many cases, site work has been replicated across the network and embedded in state and federal policy. Below are highlights from across the network in three key areas.

 **Building relationships** with investments in coaches, collaborations and caring systems that support young people's transition to adulthood.

- **Hawaii:** In collaboration with the Hawaii Department of Human Services and young adult partners, EPIC 'Ohana Inc.'s HI H.O.P.E.S. program developed the Pono Process, a youth-designed pathway that gives youth in foster care a safe, culturally grounded way to speak up when their rights are not honored. More than a grievance mechanism, it includes robust education on the Foster Youth Bill of Rights and builds practical advocacy skills for young people and the adults who serve them.
- **Indiana:** Building on a strong track record, Foster Success® has expanded its education programs nationally and now supports more than 1,800 young people annually across Indiana, Ohio, Arizona, Missouri and Maryland.
- **Maine:** Maine Youth Transition Collaboration serves as a durable public-private partnership that advances policy, strengthens systems and creates opportunities for young people with foster care experience.
- **North Carolina:** Uniting Stakeholders for Change, a partnership of young people and adult allies, produced a comprehensive tool kit for county child welfare staff who guide young adults and a companion tool kit designed specifically for youth and young adults with experience in the child welfare

system. From this early effort evolved the Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo) young leaders' program.

- **Tennessee:** The state of Tennessee expanded its extension of foster care program by raising the eligibility age from 21 to 23 and extending coverage to youth who achieved permanency through adoption or guardianship at or after age 16. In Knoxville, Lumen Flats opened as the nation's first housing program to convert a former retirement facility into supported housing for youth aging out of foster care.

► **Developing resources** that give young people the foundation they need to build stable, self-determined lives.

- **Connecticut:** The Connecticut Department of Children and Families partnered with a local bank to ensure that youth ages 14 to 17 can open savings accounts without an adult co-owner. The program pairs account access with a \$25 startup investment — automatically deposited upon completion of a financial education program — to help youth build assets.
- **Maryland:** The Baltimore City Department of Social Services worked with the Mayor's Office of Homeless Services to designate 56 housing units, each with on-site case management, life skills development and healthcare programs for young people transitioning from foster care.
- **Michigan:** Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative expanded access to driver's licenses and state IDs — documents essential to navigating daily life, employment and education — for youth in foster care.
- **Mississippi:** Mississippi Youth Voice supported state policymakers' creation of the FAITH Scholarship covering the full cost of college admission and secured the largest allocation in the nation of federal housing vouchers for youth leaving foster care.
- **Nebraska:** State lawmakers passed Bridge to Independence extended foster care legislation, a landmark bill co-created and championed by young people that provides transitioning youth with an independence coordinator, financial assistance and resources to support workforce participation.
- **Ohio:** A Place 4 Me's Opportunity Passport program launched a youth-led advisory council to elevate participant voice in program design and decision-making.

► **Advancing policies and opportunities**, including workforce pathways and expanded access that open doors for young people.

- **Arizona:** Children's Action Alliance launched the #ReleaseTheFunds campaign during the pandemic to urge public agencies to rapidly distribute more than \$3.4 million in emergency funds to young people struggling to cover rent, food and housing.

*The time and investment that the Jim Casey Initiative poured into me as a supporter and partner of young adults and families has meant more than I can express. The initiative took the time to truly know us as leaders and to remain unwavering in the truth and values required for authentic partnership, sharing power, sharing influence and leading with results. It has helped Nebraska advance new policies, implement federal priorities, improve outcomes and create sustainable change in both prevention and older-youth work.*

– **Jennifer Skala**  
Executive Vice President, Nebraska  
Children and Families Foundation

- **Georgia:** EmpowerMENT has shaped state policy for nearly two decades, influencing major victories, including Medicaid extension to age 21, juvenile code modernization, driver's license access and the State of Georgia Post-Secondary Tuition Waiver for young people with foster care experience and adopted youth who enroll in the Technical College System of Georgia.
- **Iowa:** The Iowa Department of Health and Human Services launched the Office of Youth and Family Engagement, formally embedding leaders with firsthand experience into programs, policies and processes across the child welfare system.
- **New Mexico:** NMCAN worked with young people to identify and dismantle a critical financial barrier to higher education, successfully championing a tuition waiver for youth in foster care with the governor and state legislature through years of sustained advocacy.
- **Rhode Island:** Foster Forward has built an integrated model connecting housing stability and economic mobility for young people transitioning from foster care. Its nationally recognized Works Wonders® program — co-designed and co-administered with youth — pairs individualized career coaching and paid work experience with pathways into industries such as healthcare, food service and manufacturing. Works Wonders is now being replicated in other states.

## INFLUENCING FEDERAL POLICY TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

In addition to the significant policy and practice wins that network partner sites have achieved, the Jim Casey Initiative's policy work has influenced federal legislation. Initiative leaders within the Foundation, at the site level and within the community of young people with foster care experience have been respected as valued sources of information and guidance to federal agency officials and congressional members and staff. The initiative's focus on adolescent brain development research shaped a broad range of policy improvements, with policymakers recognizing that young people's successful transitions to adulthood need time, caring relationships and concrete support. Accordingly, these improvements included elements like the extension of the age of eligibility for support services under Chafee, Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to support local child welfare initiatives, Title IV-B and Medicaid as well as the normalcy requirements under the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. To reflect the focus on supporting the transition to adulthood rather than a goal of independence, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was renamed the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. Virtually every piece of child welfare legislation passed at the federal level over the past 25 years contains critical imprints of the Jim Casey Initiative Network.

## FEDERAL POLICIES INFLUENCED BY THE JIM CASEY INITIATIVE

- **The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program — Education and Training Vouchers (2001)** helps young adults with foster care experience with postsecondary education.
- **Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008)** provided federal reimbursement for guardianship, requiring states to notify relatives of placement and to make reasonable efforts to keep siblings together. It provided federal reimbursement for foster care for young people up to 21 and created Supervised Independent Living settings. The law promoted stability and success in education and strengthened requirements for transition plans. Eligibility for Chafee services extended to children adopted or placed in guardianships at age 16 or older.
- **The Medicaid to 26 (2010)** provision of the Affordable Care Act allowed young people who age out of foster care to remain on Medicaid until age 26, regardless of income or resources.
- **The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (2014)** instituted the “reasonable and prudent parent standard” and mandated provisions of a list of rights for youth age 14 and older, including access to personal documents such as medical records and their Social Security card.
- **The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) (2018)** renamed the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. The law expanded eligibility for transition services to begin at age 14 rather than 16 and required states to provide youth with the official documentation necessary to prove foster care experience and facilitate access to services. FFPSA allowed states with extended foster care to offer Chafee services to young adults until age 23 (expanded from age 21) and education and training vouchers until age 26 (expanded from age 23). The law addressed inappropriate use of congregate care and increased oversight over use of psychotropic medication.
- **The Chafee Foster Care Program — Older Youth Provisions of the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act (2020)** increased federal Chafee funding for older youth in care during the COVID-19 pandemic and placed a temporary moratorium on aging out.
- **Foster Youth to Independence Initiative (2020)** expanded housing support for young people with foster care experience by folding this up to five-year housing subsidy into transition planning for all youth who are likely to age out.
- **The Supporting America’s Children and Families Act — Title IV-B (2025)** requires states to consult with those most affected by child welfare policies, including young people. It expanded eligibility for young adults up to age 26 for Title IV-B services, including mental health support.

## SUPPORTING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH TOOLS, TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND CONVENINGS

To support all these strategies and ensure that practitioners and policymakers around the country had what they needed to embed improvements, the Jim Casey Initiative invested in a wide range of strategies, including tool development, trainings and convenings. Notable examples include the following:

- **[The Adolescent Brain: New Research and its Implications for Young People Transitioning from Foster Care](#)**: This 2011 publication and subsequent tools including [Brain Frames](#) (2017) translated neuroscience research to help reframe approaches to child welfare policy and practices.
- **[Chafee Plus Ten: A Vision for the Next Decade](#)**: This 2010 report evaluated the first 10 years of the Chafee Act's implementation and highlighted lessons about helping young people who experience foster care succeed as adults. It described policy recommendations and a vision for the future.
- **[Foster Care to 21: Doing It Right](#)**: This 2011 issue brief describes promising practices to design foster care programs for young adults, including housing options and the role of the courts. The Jim Casey Initiative also provided technical assistance to 15 states to design extended care programs and to analyze the cost of extension.
- **[Success Beyond 18](#)**: This national campaign and convening supported efforts to extend care for young people to 21 and ensure that services and support offered are developmentally appropriate. The initiative published [a report](#) by the same name.
- **[Expectant and Parenting Youth in Foster Care: Systems Leaders Data Tool Kit](#)**: This 2019 tool kit was designed to assist system leaders in gathering, assessing, sharing and using data on expectant and parenting youth in foster care.
- **[Chafee Plus 20 congressional briefing](#)**: In partnership with the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth and sponsored by the Jim Casey Initiative, this 2019 briefing examined the role the Chafee program had in supporting better outcomes for youth and opportunities for policy improvements.
- **[Tool Kit: Advancing SFA](#)**: This 2017 resource helped child welfare practitioners, advocates and policymakers effectively implement provisions of the Strengthening Families Act, which gave youth a greater voice in their case plans and required foster families to ensure that youth can experience age-appropriate extracurricular and after-school activities.
- **[Journey to Success Campaign](#)**: This policy advocacy campaign seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for all youth and young adults who experience foster care by promoting their healing, family connections and economic security. The Jim Casey Initiative influenced the creation of Journey to Success. It is co-funded by several philanthropic organizations. Young leaders who have foster care experience are involved in every aspect of the campaign, which offers a policy framework and

recommendations, provides policy advocacy training and support to lived experts, and holds convenings and briefings on Capitol Hill.

- **Fostering Youth Transitions: Using Data to Drive Policy and Practice Decisions** (2018) and **Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: State and National Data to Drive Foster Care Advocacy**: State-by-state profiles share data on transition-age youth and young people who had aged out and described how young people who experienced foster care were faring.
- **Elevating Youth Engagement**: In 2025, the Foundation and youth engagement partner Cetera Inc. developed a curriculum that draws lessons from the Jim Casey Initiative's authentic youth engagement framework and youth-adult partnership techniques tested by network partner sites. It provides practical step-by-step lessons for youth-serving organizations that want to collaborate on policy and practice reforms with young people who have experienced foster care.

## 4 Helping to Build a National Movement

When the Jim Casey Initiative was created in 2001, its founders recognized the critical need for dedicated support for this population of young people. Yet the goal was never to undertake this journey alone. An explicit part of the original vision was to inspire, support and help build a national movement of leaders and organizations committed to supporting young people transitioning from foster care.

Today, that national movement is strong. The Jim Casey Initiative has leveraged more than \$1.3 billion in public and private investments in older youth. Sixty-five private foundations have partnered with the initiative in combined or aligned investments. Public will and understanding of the unique needs of young people who have experienced foster care have increased significantly. Young people engaged with the Jim Casey Initiative have created a powerful and durable community. Now more than ever, field leaders prioritize and support youth engagement strategies as an essential and powerful approach to their work. Numerous policy and research firms now have deep capacities related to the experiences of older youth in foster care and a new consortium deepens and extends research efforts using initiative data. New national, statewide and local organizations, including networks of young people with lived expertise, have emerged dedicated to aligned outcomes and goals. National campaigns, including Journey to Success, continue to harness the power and passion of leaders across the country.

The powerful personal growth of network partner site leaders continues to reap benefits in advocacy and innovation for young people. Site leads typically also play critical roles in leading the broader work of their organization and the coalitions and collaborations to which they contribute. Sustained investments in the growth and development of these leaders who sit within public agencies and community-based organizations — through access to new ideas, data, tools, peer relationships and technical assistance — create impact far beyond the network.

*One of the benefits of the Jim Casey Initiative is the access to technical assistance. Being a part of the Jim Casey network has brought me much professional development, mentorship and peer networking. From formal skill building, to access to data and research that allows me to incorporate into daily practice, I have grown professionally and stronger in my role, and in a way that I will carry with me.*

– **Victoria Salzman**  
Chief Strategic Development  
Officer for the Multi-Agency  
Alliance for Children (MAAC)

## Toward the Next Era: Forging Pathways to Well-Being Through Transformational Relationships

While there has been great progress in achieving outcomes for older youth who have experienced foster care, the data — and the young people — make clear that there is much more work to do. Across the country, the number of teens in foster care has dropped by 43% during the past 25 years, and there are fewer in group care and more placed with kin.<sup>6</sup> Still, the percentage of young people aging out of foster care without permanent connections to supportive caregivers or family remains largely unchanged over the last decade, and they experience a steeper climb to achieving well-being and success than their peers who have not experienced foster care.<sup>7</sup> This must be addressed with urgency.

The Jim Casey Initiative's mission remains clear, especially its commitment to helping young people achieve well-being and success. Building on all that has been learned and achieved with young people, network partner sites and national partners as collaborators during its first quarter century, the initiative recommits to its North Star: to ensure that all young people ages 14 to 26 in the United States who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday have the relationships, resources and opportunities to achieve well-being and success. Young people must have transformational and lifelong relationships with supportive adults that not only create access to concrete resources and opportunities like safe and stable housing, higher education, healthcare and financial capability but also provide the enduring connections, caring and community that are essential to true well-being.

The Jim Casey Initiative will continue to work with young people, partner site organizations and national partners to codesign innovations; improve policies, practices and services; and forge new pathways for young people to experience transformational and lifelong connections. This is a renewed commitment to:

- build on the achievements, assets and shared experiences that define the Jim Casey Initiative's success at improving outcomes for young people transitioning from foster care;
- expand the network's reach and influence;
- ground the action in current evidence and data;
- continue to elevate the voices of young leaders, who know what they need and are designing the strategies that are changing child welfare; and
- use the network's collective influence and deep expertise to cultivate the soil of possibility with our partners and align our efforts toward meaningful and lasting change in the lives of young people who have experienced foster care.

The progress of the past 25 years shows what is possible when young people are trusted as leaders and communities invest in the relationships, resources and opportunities they need to thrive. The work will continue, with young people leading the way.



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