



The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative  
*Helping youth leaving foster care make successful transitions to adulthood.*



## **National Youth in Transition Database: Lessons Learned from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative**

**NYTD**

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[www.jimcaseyyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org)





## NYTD: Lessons Learned from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

### Introduction

The long-awaited National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), required by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Chafee), will track the independent living services provided to young people in foster care (e.g., mentoring, academic support), the characteristics of the young people who receive those services, and the outcomes for young people transitioning from foster care. Beginning this month, October 2010, state child welfare agencies are required to collect outcome data via a survey from all youth who are in foster care within 45 days of their 17th birthday during federal fiscal year 2011. This cohort of young people<sup>1</sup> must be surveyed again at ages 19 and 21 whether they are in or out of foster care. A new cohort will be surveyed every third year thereafter (i.e., 2014, 2017, etc.), beginning with the 17-year-olds<sup>2</sup>.

Collecting the longitudinal outcome data within the timeframes prescribed by the regulations will be challenging for state child welfare agencies, particularly if the young people are no longer involved with the child welfare system. In 2003, the U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) reported that 30 states had tried to contact young people who had emancipated from foster care, and most were unable to reach more than half.

In addition, state child welfare agencies must bear all of the NYTD-related data collection costs, which could mean using Chafee funds that have previously been allocated for direct services or staff. There is concern that the expense of locating and surveying young people for NYTD will be so high and the federal penalty for non-compliance so low (1-5% of annual Chafee allocation for each reporting period), that some states may choose to accept the penalty as a less costly option.

The first year of implementation will be challenging as states experiment and learn the best approaches to surveying this population. But our experience convinces us that NYTD is doable for states. For the past seven years, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (the “Initiative”) has been working with our partners<sup>3</sup> to survey young people age 14 to 24 who are or have been in foster care. Based on this experience, we believe that it is possible for states to comply with the federal NYTD outcome data requirements and to even go beyond those requirements, using the NYTD “Plus” survey developed by a group of state agencies representatives, leading researchers, and foundation administrators. By doing so, states will make significant contributions toward ultimately improving outcomes for this population. NYTD presents an unprecedented opportunity to learn how young people transitioning from foster care are faring across the country and to use that information to impact policy and practice.

*“The reason to do NYTD — and to take the most robust approach possible — is not the federal mandate. If we do it only because of the mandate, we’re missing the point. We have accepted responsibility for these youth, and everything that we do know says that we need to do better by them. And in order to do better, we need to understand better and develop better ways to meet their needs. That’s why Florida is doing everything we can even under tough economic circumstances. We have chosen to use NYTD Plus, to survey every young person rather than sample, and to collect data on an annual basis.”*

Don Winstead, Deputy Secretary, Florida Department of Children and Families

*continued*

<sup>1</sup> Depending on the number of young people in foster care, a state will have to either follow the entire cohort or a random sample of them.

<sup>2</sup> Fernandez, A.L. (2008). CRS Memorandum, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act National Youth in Transition Database. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

<sup>3</sup> Initiative partners are listed in the resource section at the end of the document.

## Background

Transitioning from youth to adulthood for young people with supportive families is often a challenging developmental experience. It is not surprising then that young people who transition from foster care face a multitude of obstacles. They have averaged nearly five years in foster care, and typically “age out” as an independent adult at age 18.<sup>4</sup> Lacking the resources and support of a family, they are often unprepared for the challenges they encounter as young adults and struggle through this critical transition. Studies have demonstrated that among youth making the transition:

- more than one in five will become homeless after age 18<sup>5</sup>,
- merely 58 percent will graduate high school by age 19 (compared to 87 percent nationally)<sup>6</sup>,
- fewer than 3 percent will earn a college degree by age 25 (compared to 28 percent nationally)<sup>7</sup>, and
- one in four will be incarcerated within two years of leaving the system<sup>8</sup>.

The Initiative is a national foundation that focuses on improving the well-being of this vulnerable population. We strive to help young people transitioning from foster care to become successful, productive adults by improving the systems that support them. The Initiative’s partner sites implement a broad set of integrated strategies that include engaging young people in advocating for themselves and others, bringing together public and private partners, increasing opportunities for young people, and using data to drive decisions and galvanize public support. The Initiative measures success by improvements in the policies and practices that support young people, and ultimately in improved youth outcomes in the areas of permanence; education; employment; housing; physical and mental health; and personal and community engagement.

Within this broader context of systems improvement, Initiative sites also implement the Opportunity Passport™. The Opportunity Passport™ is a focused package of resources offered to young people ages 14 to 24 that have been in foster care on or after their 14th birthday. It includes financial literacy training, an Individual Development Account (IDA) – matched savings account – and a personal banking account. As part of their participation, young people agree to complete a web-based Opportunity Passport™ Participant Survey (OPPS) twice each year and are paid a stipend of \$40 each time a survey is completed. Half of the stipend goes into their IDA.

Working with partners across the country, Initiative sites have collected demographic and outcome data from more than 3,000 youth and young adults in or formerly in foster care. In recent years, the OPPS follow-up response rate across all ten sites increased from around 50% to 82%, with eight (8) sites having achieved response rates of 80% or above.<sup>9</sup>

## NYTD and OPPS: Similarities and Differences

There are a number of similarities between OPPS and NYTD that should be noted. First, in both cases, an outcome-based survey is administered to young people in care and out of care. Second, Initiative sites that administer OPPS and the state agencies that will be administering NYTD have limited financial resources to invest in tracking and data collection.

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<sup>4</sup> *Kids Are Waiting. (2007). Time for Reform: Aging Out and On their Own.*


<sup>5</sup> *Casey Family Programs. (1998). Northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA. p. 37.*

<sup>6</sup> *Courtney, M.E., and Dworsky, A. (2005). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children. p. 22.*

<sup>7</sup> *Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A.C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T., and Holmes, K. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. p. 1.*

<sup>8</sup> *Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Terao, S., Bost, N., Cusick, G.R., Keller, T., and Havlicek, J. (2005). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children. p. 61.*

<sup>9</sup> *Based on the April 2009 OPPS administration.*



NYTD and OPPS are different in several ways as well. The young people taking OPPS are voluntary participants. The young people who will be asked to complete the NYTD survey will not have made a choice to participate. In addition, OPPS is a confidential survey, whereas NYTD data must include identifiers so that it can be linked with other child welfare data. Lastly, Opportunity Passport™ participants are likely in more frequent contact with local staff for a variety of reasons. In contrast, states are only required to survey young people every other year for NYTD and may not be in contact otherwise. Knowing that these young people tend to very mobile and at high risk of homelessness after they leave care, a two-year window between contacts could make it incredibly difficult to locate the young people for the follow-up surveys at ages 19 and 21.

These differences notwithstanding, we believe that as states move forward with the NYTD outcome data collection, they can benefit from the key lessons we learned from our experiences with OPPS. As states embark on this effort, we share some of those lessons in the hope that states will be able to avoid some of the pitfalls we encountered, and to encourage states to not only collect NYTD data, but to go beyond the federal requirements and use the NYTD Plus survey. The key lessons include:

- Young people must be engaged as partners;
- States must be very intentional about how they approach the data collection;
- Keeping in touch with young people after they leave care will be critical to success; and
- Merely meeting the minimum federal data collection requirements will not be enough.

## Lesson Learned: Young people must be engaged as partners

An important lesson we have learned is to shift from thinking of the young people as only the “subjects” of the data collection to thinking about them as true partners in this effort. Although young people will not have elected to participate in the NYTD outcomes data collection, they can be engaged in meaningful ways.

*“Having young people involved [in administering the Opportunity Passport™ Participant Survey] creates ownership. We begin to develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the purpose of survey, feeling a part of it instead of feeling like we’re just being questioned or investigated. When we understand that the survey is being done to help others in our same situation, we are more likely to become involved and we feel good about it. It will be the same for NYTD.”*

Danielle Brunetta, former Opportunity Passport™ participants

Our sites learned that when efforts were made to help the young people understand the value of the data being collected and how those data would be used to make a difference in the lives of their peers, their siblings, and young people that will experience foster care in the future, they became advocates for the data collection. Understanding that their answers could “make things better” for others is a powerful motivation. Young people taking part in NYTD could be similarly encouraged to feel like they are participating in an effort to help other young people in foster care.

To that end, young people should have an opportunity to review the aggregate NYTD data, help interpret what they mean, and share them with stakeholders. This could happen through youth leadership boards or advisory committees. Even basic facts such as the percentage of young people with health insurance or the percentage pursuing post-secondary education can be powerful information. Young people have proven to be some of the most effective “consumers” of the OPPS information and have successfully used it to advocate for improved policy and practices. This reinforces the value of their participation.

### ***Data on Post-Secondary Education Leads to Improvements***

*In the Northern Michigan site, there was a very low number of youth and young adults reporting enrollment in college and other post-secondary training. The pertinent OPPS data were shared with the self-evaluation team and the youth leadership and community partnership boards, which are part of local implementation of the Initiative strategies. The three groups worked cooperatively on a plan to support a half-time education planner. Paid through grant funds allocated to the community partnership board, the education planner worked with local Opportunity Passport™ participants to support their efforts to complete high school, apply for admissions and financial aid at the schools of their choice, and provide advice and encouragement through the enrollment and early challenges of post-secondary education. One year after the education coordinator began work, the number of young people entering college and post-secondary programs tripled in the ten-county area served. As a result, the Department of Human Services began the process of adding education planners to serve older youth in care throughout the state.*

In fact, young people should be involved in the data collection process from the beginning. OPPS participants told us early in the development of the Initiative that a web-based survey would help them feel like they could answer honestly and without fear of “getting in trouble.” Paper and pencil surveys that are handed in can easily be looked at by caseworkers and young people said that this would discourage them from answering honestly. We recommend that states take this advice and begin using a web-based survey approach, if they are not already doing so. Some states are already taking a web-based survey approach, including Illinois and Florida.

Furthermore, even though NYTD data are not confidential on the “back end,” administering the survey this way can help ease young people’s concerns. This method also helps improve data integrity and reduce costs over time by eliminating the need for data entry. Our experience with OPPS and feedback from young people clearly show that the benefits of confidentiality and data integrity outweigh the initial costs of getting a web-based survey set up.

Young people also said they were wary of answering OPPS questions for the child welfare agency. While many of the Initiative site lead agencies collecting OPPS data were local nonprofits, universities or foundations, in Michigan the lead agency was the Department of Human Services (DHS). In addition to using a web-based survey for confidentiality, staff found that it was important to downplay their DHS-affiliation because, in many cases, young people who had left care didn’t want to be involved with the state agency again.

In a leadership role, young people will help states succeed in their data collection effort. They can provide advice on youth-friendly approaches for staying in touch with their peers, such as texting and social networking. Young people can give advice on how to approach young people and talk about the survey. Small details can sometimes make big differences. For example, when they enroll in the Opportunity Passport™, young people are asked to identify up to six people who could help locate them. Recently, a participant recommended that the young person have the option of noting whether they wanted the contact person to know that they had been in foster care. This was a minor point that we never considered but one that will help collect more comprehensive contact information. States could follow this strategy at the time of the baseline survey, and should also use it for the development of the young person’s transition plan 90 days prior to discharge as now required under federal law.

### **Relevance is important for staff too.**

*Another way to maintain high response rates is to help staff understand the relevance of the data to their everyday efforts to improve the lives of young people. When OPPS data are shared with staff and other stakeholders in a timely way, and are used to inform decision-making, it creates buy-in and support for the survey. The NYTD data should be shared broadly and used to drive improvements in supports and services.*

## **Lesson Learned: States must be very intentional about how they approach the data collection**

For the first three years of the Initiative's data collection, OPPS was administered four times per year on a rolling basis, i.e., young people were surveyed at the time of their enrollment in the Opportunity Passport™ and then every three months thereafter. However, the follow-up response rate across sites hovered around 50%. Site representatives and Opportunity Passport™ participants told us that the rolling administration of the survey was burdensome, especially because tracking and locating young people who had already left care was very difficult for staff with an already heavy workload.

Based on this feedback, changes were made to the administration of the OPPS. Beginning in 2008, all young people were surveyed twice a year (April and October) and an 80% response rate goal was set for all sites. Staff work schedules were adapted to accommodate survey taking in April and October. Time was allocated to make multiple calls, texts and emails to the young people, and if necessary, to contact the relatives and friends that the young person had identified as people that would likely know their whereabouts. Other young people, such as those engaged in youth leadership boards, and community partners, including contracted Chafee service providers, could focus and lend support during the survey period. Events and services that targeted young people were scheduled in April and October and surveying was “piggy-backed” on these events to maximize the young people reached. ***Since these changes were made the follow-up response rate increased from 50% to 82% across sites.***

How do these lessons apply to NYTD? States are required to administer the baseline survey within 45 days of each young person's 17th birthday. This is similar to our original “rolling” data collection approach. Given that the young people are still in care and their whereabouts are likely known, it seems most appropriate that the baseline survey be administered by caseworkers or other child welfare agency staff that have direct access to contact information. As many states are currently doing, reminders could be put into case management systems to notify when the surveys are coming due and then when the deadline is approaching.

However, the more focused data collection approach could work for the follow-up population at 19 and 21 – when the young people are out of care and therefore more difficult to locate. Data collection during the months of April and October may also make the most sense because they are the first months of each AFCARS reporting period. During each follow-up data collection year, states are required to allocate and administer the survey to young people who turn 19 or 21 within the six-month AFCARS reporting period. If the required NYTD response rate is not reached during the first month of the reporting period, or a state would like to achieve a higher response rate, the agency would then have an additional five months to focus on those young people who were not surveyed during the first month.

This approach may also make sense if a state chooses to outsource its data collection. Regardless of who administers the NYTD survey, they will need some access to and support from front-line staff to find the young people. We believe that garnering both state agency and survey partner resources during focused-survey months improves response rates.



## **Lesson Learned: Keeping in touch with young people after they leave care will be critical to success**

Many states have already found out how difficult it is to stay in touch with young people after they leave care. But this will be critical to success. When considering changes to the administration of OPPS, the Initiative contemplated having young people surveyed only once a year. However many of the sites felt that twice a year was better because it enabled more contacts with the young people and more opportunities to collect important information about how they were doing. NYTD data collection will occur once every other year rather than twice a year, unless a state decides to survey youth more often. We know these young people are often transient, and the more time between contacts, the harder they will be to find.

We recommend that states collect contact information from young people when they administer the baseline survey at age 17, including contact information on friends and family members who could help locate them. Young people should be asked, “who will always know where you are?” This contact information should be updated as often as possible – not just every other year when NYTD is required to be administered. If states lose touch with these young people for any extended period of time, it will be very challenging and costly to find them again.

To the extent that States provide any ongoing support to young people after they exit care, the state agency or service providers involved should be enlisted to update contact information and administer outcome surveys to those young people with whom they are still connected. Of course, extending foster care to age 21 would also make follow up data collection easier.

States should also consider providing incentives to young people to complete the survey at baseline and during follow-up. In the end, forty dollars or some similar amount will ultimately not cost the state a lot of money. It shows the young people that their time and the information they are providing are valuable. It also gives them some encouragement to keep in touch and “be found” when the survey time comes.

## **Lesson Learned: Merely meeting the minimum federal NYTD data collection requirements will not be enough.**


Prior to Chafee, relatively little was known about the outcomes of young people who age out of foster care. Thanks to studies such as the *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*<sup>10</sup> (Midwest Evaluation) as well as the OPPS, the field has moved forward since the Chafee legislation was signed in 1999. However, the federally required NYTD questions will not, by themselves, give states enough information to improve the services and supports they provide to transitioning foster youth. In fact, they are likely to raise as many questions as they answer for child welfare administrators, legislators and other stakeholders.

For example, as part of NYTD, young people will be asked if they are attending school and what is their highest educational certification attained. What these questions will not capture is the extent to which young people have completed at least some post-secondary education even if they have not earned a degree. This is an important omission because completing

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<sup>10</sup> Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G.R., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., & Perez, A. (2007). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.





some post-secondary education increases the likelihood of a young person becoming self-sufficient.<sup>11</sup> Just a few additional questions would provide a much fuller picture, and help states better support young people in post-secondary school.

Furthermore, since Chafee passed in 1999, we have increasingly come to recognize the importance of permanent family connections and relationships with adults. The NYTD-required question about permanence asks “*Currently is there at least one adult in your life, other than your caseworker, to whom you can go to for advice or emotional support?*” We ask a similar question as part of OPPS, and similarly worded questions have also been asked as part of the Midwest Evaluation.<sup>12</sup> Responses to these questions have not shed light on the nature of these relationships or the kind of supports they provide. Is this person someone that the young person considers to be family? Can they rely on him or her for a place to live? What about help with education, employment and health care?

## NYTD Plus

With the start of the first reporting period, it is understandable that most states have focused on meeting the minimum federal requirements. However, we strongly urge states (that are not already), to begin planning now to use NYTD Plus in the next round of data collection. The added cost will be minimal but the information will be very valuable.

In 2008, a NYTD National Advisory Committee (NAC) was created to make recommendations to policy makers and practitioners about best practices for complying with the NYTD requirements. The NYTD NAC includes representatives from 19 state child welfare agencies and the District of Columbia, the Initiative, the Eckerd Family Foundation, American Public Human Services Association, the Chapin Hall Center at the University of Chicago, Metis Associates, and young people who had been in foster care.

One of committee’s tasks was to develop a more comprehensive NYTD survey that met the federal requirements, yet included additional questions that would give states the most relevant and useful information. The result was two NYTD “Plus” instruments that are contained in the National Youth in Transition Database Instructional Guidebook and Architectural Blueprint (see resource list). The first is an approximately 60-question survey that is similar to OPPS. The second is a longer, approximately 90-question version. Both instruments contain all of the required NYTD questions as well as additional questions in selected outcome areas, such as education and employment. Most importantly, they include a set of seven questions about permanent connections with adults and relationships with their biological family.

Young people were very much involved in the development of NYTD Plus. Young people represented on the NAC participated in the development of the NYTD Plus, including the permanence questions. A group of interns from the Initiative – all young people who were formerly in foster care – completed a web-based version of the NYTD Plus survey and provided feedback to the NAC. The permanence questions were then piloted with more than 300 young people receiving aftercare services in Iowa. The results of this pilot study clearly demonstrate the importance of learning more about the kinds of supports young people are receiving from adults in their life after leaving care. (see text box on Iowa NYTD Plus pilot).

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, Brett, *A Portrait of Well-Being in Early Adulthood* (unpublished paper, *Child Trends* 2003)

<sup>12</sup> Courtney, M.E., Dworky, A., Cusick, G.R., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., & Perez, A., (2007). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.

### **NYTD Plus permanence questions pilot in Iowa.**

*In collaboration with the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa, a group of contracted aftercare service providers participated in the pilot of the NYTD Plus permanence questions. The seven permanence questions were added to a regular “customer satisfaction” survey given to young people receiving aftercare or Preparation for Adult Living service. Findings included:*

- Most of the young people reported that they had close relationships to their biological family, and the people most frequently identified were siblings and biological mothers.*
- A high percentage of young people reported having at least one permanent connection in their life. The adult most identified by the young people as their primary permanent connection was their birth parent, followed by foster parent and spouse/partner.*
- Almost all of the young people who had a permanent connection with an adult reported that they can count on their primary permanent connection when they need to talk to someone about their problems or get advice (97% and 95% respectively), yet less than one third of young people said that they could count on this person to pay for their education (27%).*

*“Despite all the struggles and challenges that there are with implementing NYTD, it is so important that we collect information on permanence. The data on services and supports will not mean as much if we’re missing that major ingredient – whether the young person has someone that is there for them and is able to support them. Because if they don’t, all of the services and supports we are providing are being built on shaky ground. Once you have [a young person] taking the survey, you just can’t miss the opportunity to gather this additional, richer information.”*

*Mary Nelson, former Administrator, Iowa Department of Human Services, Division of Child and Family Services*

## **Conclusion**

As states embark on collecting NYTD data, there will be challenges and setbacks. However, despite the challenges it presents, ***we feel that we owe it to the young people that leave our care to collect these data.*** And, based on our experience, we believe that NYTD is doable – especially with the support and input from the young people themselves. NYTD can help us better understand how to support them and give voice to this vulnerable and often neglected group.

And while NYTD is a step in the right direction, NYTD Plus is better because it will give a fuller picture of what these young people are experiencing and what services and supports are needed to improve their life outcomes. The cost of additional questions is negligible, especially compared to the value of the information received. In our own sites we have witnessed policy and system improvements that have occurred as a result of states having outcome data on which to base their decisions, and we feel this will also be true for states that implement NYTD Plus. Collecting useful information is the right thing to do for young people transitioning from foster care, knowing that this population – if properly supported – has all the potential in the world to become successful, productive adults.



## Resources

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative *www.jimcaseyyouth.org*.

### Partners include:

- Atlanta, GA – The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta
- Des Moines, IA – Youth Policy Institute of Iowa
- Hartford/Bridgeport, CT – Connecticut Department of Children and Families
- Hawaii – EPIC ‘Ohana
- Indiana – United Way of Central Indiana
- Maine – University of South Maine, Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service
- Michigan (Detroit & 10 Northern Counties) – Department of Human Services
- Nashville, TN – Vanderbilt Child and Family Policy Center
- Omaha, NE – Nebraska Children and Families Foundation
- Providence, RI – Rhode Island Foster Parents Association
- Tampa, FL – Connected by 25 Initiative (Tampa, FL)

**National Youth in Transition Database: Instructional Guidebook and Architectural Blueprint**, Dworsky, A. & Crayton, C. (2009). American Public Human Services Association and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago Center for State Foster Care and Adoption Data. *www.aphsa.org*, *napcwa.org*, *chapinhall.org*.

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**Chafee National Youth in Transition Database; Final Rule**. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2008).



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