

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



On the tenth anniversary of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, this paper takes a close look at what has been learned since the law's enactment. The Chafee Act made significant improvements in the Independent Living Program. It made funds available to states to provide youth with the education, vocational and employment training necessary to obtain employment and/or prepare for postsecondary education, training in daily living skills, substance abuse prevention, pregnancy prevention and preventive health activities. The law also recognized the needs of young people who had left foster care, providing states with federal matching funds and services for older youth who had left foster care but had not reached age 21, providing room and board for youth ages 18 to 21 who had left foster care, and the option to extend Medicaid to 18, 19 and 20-year-olds who had emancipated from foster care.

Despite its many positive contributions, the Chafee Act continued the philosophy of the Independent Living Program by placing emphasis on making youth “independent” at an age when few young people in the United States have even the rudimentary skills to survive wholly on their own. It did not address the critical role of families in young adults' lives nor the basic support that families typically provide their young adult children well past the age of 18 or 21. The Act did not reference permanence as a critical outcome for youth in foster care. Further, the Act did not recognize the importance of providing young people with opportunities to build strong relationships with adults and peers, participate in structured activities, and develop a broad and diverse network of social support.

Over the past decade, the number of youth aging out of foster care each year continued to grow. Since 1999, more than 230,000 young people have aged out of foster care. Research shows that the outcomes for the majority of these young people are poor. Studies have shown that young people who age out of foster care often suffer academically, have poor secondary school outcomes, face challenges in attending and completing college, are at risk of early pregnancy, and are at risk of arrest and incarceration. Studies also indicate that youth of color are disproportionately represented in this population of young people.

What Have We Learned Since 1999?

Since 1999, the field of child welfare has learned much about what young people need to successfully transition to adulthood. Ten key lessons have emerged:

1) Permanence is vital for youth.

The past decade has seen a focus on family permanence for youth, with increasing attention to the importance of family in youth's lives. States and localities have developed programs, practices and tools to support the achievement of family permanence for youth in care. Evaluations, including those conducted by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the evaluations of federally funded programs on youth permanence, have shown that having a permanent family relationship and feeling connected to an adult are key to the well-being of young people.

2) Young people must be served from a youth development and developmentally appropriate perspective.

Much has been learned since 1999 about the importance of providing services and supports for young people based on both their chronological age and developmental attainment. The understanding of adolescent brain development and its implications for young people's transitions to adulthood has greatly expanded. The concept of "emerging adulthood" has informed thinking about the gradual process by which young people achieve adulthood and has reinforced the critical role of family in supporting young people during the transition.

3) Young people must be engaged in planning for their futures and advocacy.

The Chafee Act mandated that states ensure that youth in independent living programs participate directly in designing their own services and supports. Since 1999, the engagement of youth in foster care in their own planning has emerged as a best practice. Agencies are implementing a variety of approaches to involving youth along a continuum of youth serving, youth input, youth engagement, and youth-led processes. The Pew Charitable Trusts' Kids are Waiting campaign, the National Governors Association Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning from Foster Care, and the implementation of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative strategy of youth engagement in jurisdictions across the country, have provided a rich environment for learning how to support young people in becoming advocates for themselves and others.

4) Independent living programs have not been successful in preparing young people in foster care for adulthood.

Over the past decade, research has examined the quality of independent living programs and the outcomes they achieve. In general, programs have been found to be ineffective in meeting the needs of young people in the areas of education and employment, economic well-being, housing, delinquency, pregnancy, and receipt of needed documentation.

5) Young people currently and formerly in foster care need to build financial resources and assets.

With the growing appreciation of the complexities of the transition to adulthood for young people in the twenty-first century, more attention has focused on the need for financial resources and assets to support them through this process. The need is even more dramatic for young people currently or formerly in foster care because they lack the financial support that families often provide. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities has developed the Opportunity Passport™, a package of resources designed to help young people learn financial management; obtain experience with the banking system; save money for education, housing, health care, and other specified expenses; and gain streamlined access to educational, training and vocational opportunities. The accumulation of assets has been found to have important short- and long-term benefits for young people currently or formerly in foster care.

6) Data must be available to track outcomes and drive decisions in communities and states.

With the growing body of research on the poor outcomes for young people who age out of foster care, there has been a heightened focus on clearly and methodically tracking outcomes for young people. The Institute for Child and Family Policy at the University of Maine and the University of Kansas School of Social Work, among others, have developed a range of tools to assist states and communities develop data systems to track permanence, well-being and safety outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's research, evaluation, and communications strategy has focused on documenting results and identifying and disseminating evidence-based and promising practices. Among the lessons learned are that data must be collected and used to guide decision making, measure the degree to which outcomes for young people are improving, and develop the public will to support young people's successful transitions to adulthood.

7) Partnerships and resources are essential in achieving positive outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care.

The past decade has seen a new commitment to partnerships between child welfare agencies and other service systems, including physical health, mental health, substance abuse prevention and treatment and education, and between the public and private sectors. Experience suggests that young people currently and formerly in foster care have better outcomes when cross systems partnerships, supported by adequate resources, are in place. The Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services has focused on the financial resources that are needed to achieve and sustain youth permanence. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative brings together key local decision-makers and other people of influence who take responsibility for leveraging public and private resources that will provide increased opportunities for youth in foster care. Among the lessons learned are that partnerships are critical to success and that partners must have the ability to sustain change by influencing public policy, funding, and practices in child welfare, employment, education, housing, health and banking.

8) Public policy and public will are critical elements in effectively serving youth currently and formerly in foster care.

A number of initiatives and efforts have identified public policy and public will as critical to positive outcomes for young people in or formerly in foster care, including the California Blue Ribbon Commission, the National Foster Care Coalition, and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities' Initiative. The Initiative, for example, uses strategies to ensure that public and private systems are responsive and effective, and that the public understands and supports the work involved in effectively serving youth in care. A key learning is that improving policies, practices and funding patterns of multiple systems is essential to helping young people transition successfully to adulthood.

9) Court involvement is crucial to achieving and monitoring positive outcomes for young people in foster care.

In the early 2000s, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care highlighted the role of courts in promoting positive outcomes for young people in foster care. Since that time, greater attention has focused on young people's active participation in their court proceedings. In addition, there has been a growing recognition of the role of courts in creating and enforcing deadlines for permanency planning and the provision of services to prepare young people for adulthood.

10) The leveraging of financing and ideas is key to positive outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care.

Over the past decade, the need to leverage financing and ideas has become more critical. The Forum for Youth Investment and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative have learned much about the critical role of leveraging in bringing about positive outcomes for youth as they transition to adulthood. With regard to financial leveraging, a clear lesson is the power of public dollars in serving young people in or leaving foster care. A second clear lesson is that the leveraging of ideas to influence thinking and practice is equally critical.



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