

# YOUTH SERVICES

## ACTION

- Pass the Foster Care Continuing Opportunities Act.
- Pass the Medicaid Foster Care Coverage Act.
- Expand eligibility and improve services to youth in the child welfare system, or who were formerly in child welfare, through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Expand eligibility for independent living services to age 24, including room and board. Increase funding to at least \$200 million to support expansion of eligibility and services.
- Improve education opportunities for youth in foster care by making improvements to the Education and Training Voucher program. Increase funding for the voucher program to at least \$60 million and ensure all of the funds are used for this purpose.
- Include provisions in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act to enhance education supports for children in foster care.
- Provide the necessary resources for implementing the National Youth in Transition Database.

## HISTORY

Federal support for independent living services for foster youth began in 1986 when Title IV-E was amended to include the Independent Living Program to assist youth who would eventually be emancipated from foster care. In 1993, Congress permanently extended the authority for independent living. Significant improvements were enacted in 1999 with passage of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, in honor of the Rhode Island senator who was one of the law's sponsors and who died before it was enacted. The law allows states to extend Medicaid coverage to former foster children between 18 and 21 years old, and funding was doubled to \$140 million per year, which became effective in 2001. Also in 2001, Congress authorized an additional \$60 million in discretionary funds for education and training vouchers for youth who are eligible for the Foster Care Independence Program, as well as youth who are adopted from foster care after reaching age 16.

## FOSTER CARE CONTINUING OPPORTUNITIES ACT

Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) introduced the Foster Care Continuing Opportunities Act (S. 1512) on May 24, 2007. This legislation would extend Title IV-E foster care funding to age 21.

In 2005, 24,211 young people left foster care simply because they became too old. This is referred to as aging-out of foster care. Many young people transitioning out of the foster care system face great instability once finding themselves on their own, with few, if any, financial resources, no place to live, and little or no support from family, friends, and community. The experiences of these youth place them at higher risk for unemployment, poor educational outcomes, health issues, early parenthood, long-term dependency on public assistance, increased rates of incarceration, and homelessness.

This legislation would simply amend the current law that defines foster children to age 18. States would have an option to extend this to age 21. Under current law, limited funds are available under the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (see below).

## MEDICAID FOSTER CARE COVERAGE ACT

Rep. Dennis Cardoza (D-CA) introduced the Medicaid Foster Care Coverage Act (H.R. 1376) on March 7, 2007. This legislation amends title XIX of the Social Security Act to establish independent foster care adolescents as a mandatory category of individuals for coverage under state Medicaid programs.

For young people leaving foster care, lack of health care poses a substantial challenge. The Chafee Program allows states to extend Medicaid coverage to former foster children between ages 18 and 21. Despite Medicaid's tremendous advantage for youth in foster care, only 17 states had implemented the extension by early 2007.

Given the high rates of physical and mental health problems extensively documented among children and youth in foster care, access to health services is a critical factor as young people transition to adulthood. Because most children and youth in foster care are covered by Medicaid, use of the expansion option



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would allow a state to readily facilitate the transfer of a youth's Medicaid eligibility from one category to another without any gap in coverage as they exit foster care. Medicaid coverage should continue for all foster youth until at least age 21.

Keeping medical records up to date and accessible is another challenge for young people involved with child welfare. Advances have been made in electronic record keeping, but more are needed.

## **John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program**

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program helps states provide services to young people who are likely to remain in foster care until age 18, as well as former foster children beyond age 18. The program helps eligible children make the transition to self-sufficiency through such services as assistance in earning a high school diploma, support in career exploration, vocational training, job placement and retention, and training in daily living skills. In addition to the Medicaid coverage, the program allows up to 30% of the funds be used for room and board. Chafee is a capped entitlement with an annual ceiling of \$140 million, which has not been increased since 2001.

Adolescents constitute a major segment of the youngsters the child welfare system serves. Most youth enter out-of-home care as a result of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Others have run away from home or have no home. Young people transitioning out of the foster care system are significantly affected by the instability that accompanies long periods of out-of-home placement during childhood and adolescence.

The resulting harm to the youth themselves, their communities, and the society at large is unacceptably high. To reduce these outcomes, outreach to youth and the quality of services provided need to be improved. In addition, expanding eligibility for critical support for young people leaving foster care will ensure a successful transition to independence and self-sufficiency, and reduce the numbers of young people who become homeless, unemployed, incarcerated, and/or at high risk of becoming victims and victimizers. To accomplish this improvement and expansion, funding for the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program needs to be increased significantly.

## **E D U C A T I O N**

Reauthorizing the Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento) is an opportunity to improve education outcomes for children and youth in foster care. McKinney-Vento provides access to essential federal education protections and rights for homeless children and youth. Children

and youth who are eligible for McKinney-Vento have access to supports for school success that many children involved in child welfare lack: school stability or immediate enrollment if stability is not possible, school staff charged with ensuring their prompt enrollment, and more. While these protections currently apply to a subset of children involved in foster care, including those "awaiting foster care placement," states have defined this phrase differently. States vary widely in their application of these protections for this population. As a result, the opportunities for children and youth in foster care may depend on where they live. The reauthorization of McKinney-Vento provides an opportunity to ensure these protections are available to all children in foster care, with special accommodation for the needs and family dynamics that face children in foster care.

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program provides assistance of up to \$5,000 per year for the cost of attendance at an institution of higher education for youth who age out of foster care or are adopted after age 16. Funding for this program has never reached the amount requested by President Bush—\$60 million—which itself is not enough to meet the need. The ETV program began receiving funds in 2003 and was set at \$42 million. In 2005, funding increased to \$46.6 million; however, for FY 2008, funds were reduced to \$45.3 million. Funding for the ETV program should be expanded to at least the level proposed by the President.

Further improvements to the ETV program are needed, including adjusting eligibility to include youth adopted after age 14, and requiring technical assistance for states to ensure funds are fully utilized. Also, instead of being returned to the federal treasury, unused state ETV funds should be transferred to other states' ETV programs with demonstrated unmet need.

## **National Youth In Transition Database**

Congress should provide the resources necessary for implementation of the National Youth in Transition Database. This new initiative is a tremendous opportunity to provide valuable information that will inform future improvements in services to young people. The funds for implementation should be a priority for Congress and not come at the expense of existing services or supports or reduced services to adolescents receiving Chafee and ETV funding.

## **K E Y F A C T S**

- In 2005, 24,211 children aged-out of out-of-home care.
- A study of young adults who had spent a year or more in foster care between age 14 and 18 found that 25% had experienced post-traumatic stress, compared to 4% of the general adult population.



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- Three in 10 of the nation's homeless adults report foster care history.
- A recent study found that one-third of older youth in foster care were identified by caseworkers as having one or more special mental health, medical, pregnancy and parenting, substance abuse, or developmental needs that significantly interfered with their ability to live independently.
- In Clark County, Nevada, 55% of former foster youth reported not having health insurance after leaving foster care.
- Forty-four percent of former foster youth in Wisconsin reported difficulty accessing health and mental health services.
- The rate at which foster youth complete high school (50%) is significantly below the rate of their peers (70%), and the rate at which college-qualified foster youth attend postsecondary education (20%) is substantially below the rate of their peers (60%).
- The Census Bureau reports college graduates make \$23,000 more per year than those with high school diplomas.

Sources for statistical information are provided in the online version of this fact sheet. See [www.cwla.org/advocacy/2008legagenda.htm](http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/2008legagenda.htm).

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