



Ensuring Safe, Stable and Affordable Housing for Young People Aging Out of Foster Care

National Foster Youth Advisory Council

The members of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) believe that every young person aging out of foster care is entitled to a wide array of supports, resources and services to ensure safe, stable and affordable housing upon discharge.

We believe that all young people preparing to age out of the foster care system need:

- To work in partnership to develop an effective discharge plan with their case manager;
- To have opportunities to practice living on their own prior to exiting foster care;
- To have access to safe, stable and affordable housing prior to discharge;
- To have a permanent connection in their lives;
- To have access to resources, services and financial supports that promote and support long-term success and positive housing outcomes

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) conducted a survey with State Independent Living Coordinators to gather information regarding some of the state policies and practices that impact housing outcomes for young people leaving the foster care system. In an effort to gather the experiences and views of young people currently in the system or preparing to age out, NFYAC members were asked to share some of their experiences and make recommendations for improving housing outcomes for youth aging out of the foster care system. The discussion that took place confirmed that housing continues to be one of the most critical issues confronting young people upon discharge.

Young people aging out of the foster care system need economic security and stable housing upon discharge. However, high unemployment rates, scarcity of jobs and the lack of affordable housing options put young people transitioning out of foster care at a significant disadvantage. With limited supports and resources, many of these young people are forced into homelessness. NFYAC members believe that with a solid discharge plan and a reliable support network, youth formerly in foster care can become thriving, productive and contributing members of their communities.

**NFYAC's Top 10 Recommendations for
Ensuring Every Youth Aging Out of Foster Care
Has a Place to Call Home**

Work with me to develop an effective transition plan.

Case managers and social workers need to work in partnership with young people preparing to “age out” to develop a solid, effective discharge plan to help youth to successfully transition out of foster care. This includes securing housing, developing a budget, and teaching the life skills necessary to live on your own. One NFYAC member said he felt like he had half of a plan – “The plan was to get housing however, the part that was missing was where and how.” Another NFYAC member indicated that he only had a “plan on paper” but nothing else to prepare him to exit the system. Many NFYAC members identified college as their housing plan. Unfortunately, college housing is not an option for all foster youth. Young people in foster care need to participate in independent living programs that will ensure that they are receiving adequate life skills necessary to become thriving adults. Social workers and case managers must address housing in each youth’s discharge plan in order to ensure stability upon discharge. Child welfare workers need to be aware of housing resources available in the community. Discharge to homelessness or precarious housing is NEVER an option. *No foster youth should leave the foster care system without a solid, effective transition plan.*

Provide me with a permanent connection.

Unlike their peers, many young people in foster care lack social and familial connections. Young people in foster care need to experience a sense of stability – they need to have someone to rely on. Foster youth are resilient, with many strengths and assets. Just like their peers, they often need someone to nurture these gifts and provide them with opportunities that prepare them to serve in their own communities. The potential of these young people is limitless, but they require nurturing and supportive connections from others. Almost all of the NFYAC members said that they would have liked to have someone to call when they had a question about some “real” life issue. Unfortunately, young people leaving the system do not always have a strong support network. Therefore, it is important that these young people have a permanent connection that will teach and assist them in accessing information and resources in their community in case a crisis arises. *No foster youth should not leave the foster care system without permanent connections.*

Provide me with the opportunities to practice living on my own.

Young people in foster care need to be given the opportunity to practice life skills before actually living on their own. Youth can be provided these

opportunities through various living arrangements such as scattered site apartments, supervised apartments, group homes, and subsidized housing. These housing options provide youth with hands-on experiences while still in foster care. Like their peers, not all young people in foster care have the skills sets necessary to live on their own when exiting the system. NFYAC members indicated that young people need to learn how to live on their own before actually having to do it. Many Council members said that they did not know enough about the realities of adulthood including information about credit, security deposits and lease agreements when they left the system. *No foster youth should leave the foster care system without this knowledge.*

Make sure I know about my finances.

Foster youth need to be financially literate prior to discharge. Youth need to know how to open a checking account, balance a checkbook, pay their bills and save money. Foster youth need to learn how to be economically savvy by asking themselves, “what is the best bargain or do I really need this or do I just want it?” These young people also need to understand and know how to protect their credit and how bad credit can influence their future. NFYAC members shared how family members tried to use their name to open accounts, which negatively impacted their credit. Youth need to be aware of issues such as stolen identities and predatory lending. It is unfair to expect a foster youth to develop these skills without giving him or her the knowledge and opportunity to practice with supervision. *No foster youth should leave the foster care system without being financially literate.*

Let me know my options.

Young people in foster care have the right to know that there are programs, policies, community resources and federal funding streams available to support housing outcomes. For example, States can use up to 30% of Chafee funds for room and board to youth 18 to 21 years of age. Foster youth often do not have the information that they need to navigate the system. Young people need to know that they have access to Chafee funds, which include financial assistance for housing and education services. One NFYAC member says, “young people who have the information are the ones who are fighting to be successful.” *No foster youth should exit the system without knowledge about the funding that is intended to help them successfully transition into adulthood.*

Level the playing field for young people leaving foster care.

The average 18 year old does not have to worry about where he or she is going to live or how much money will he or she have to earn to make this month’s rent. In fact, according to the 2000 Census, 4 million people between the ages of 25 and 34 lived with their parents due to economic

realities. Unfortunately, many young people in foster care do not have the option of turning to their families for emotional, financial or housing supports. Instead, they have to figure out how to make ends meet on their own. Foster youth need to be afforded the same supports and opportunities as their peers without the added pressure of trying to make ends meet in tough economic times. According to one NFYAC member, having a safe and stable place to live decreases a foster youth's stress and instead, gives him or her the opportunity to focus on creating a stable home environment. *No foster youth should have to worry about where he or she is going to sleep tonight.*

Don't put me in a position to make poor choices.

Unfortunately, foster youth are often forced into a position to make poor choices. One NFYAC member shared that his state discharges youth at 19 or when you complete high school. He chose to delay graduation so that he would not be discharged earlier. Former foster youth are often forced into situations that put them at-risk due to the lack of policies and practices that support the positive and healthy development of young people in foster care. *No foster youth should be forced to make poor choices.*

Teach me the skills to appropriately deal with my biological family.

Due to a lack of housing options, foster youth frequently return to their biological families after aging out of the foster care system. Unfortunately, many times they are not adequately prepared to deal with their biological families, which often result in disappointment. Foster youth need to feel connected and often, they return to their families seeking not only housing but also a sense of stability and connection. Several NFYAC members indicated that they returned to their biological families after leaving foster care because they had nowhere else to go. Foster youth need to know how to set boundaries and develop relationships with their biological families on their terms. *No youth should leave foster care ill prepared to confront issues related to their biological families.*

Advocate on our behalf.

Every young person needs someone on his or her side. Unfortunately, foster youth are often overlooked. Foster youth deserve someone advocating on his or her behalf. "No one wants to take a chance with you" one Council member says. Foster youth need someone advocating on their behalf whether it is to get into an apartment with no rental or credit history or lobbying to Congress to ensure safe, stable and affordable housing for youth aging out of foster care. *No foster youth should ever feel like nobody is on their side.*

It's all connected.

Youth aging out of the foster care system are significantly impacted by long periods of out of home placements. The life events of these former foster youth place them at an increased risk for experiencing adversity. Therefore, it is important to provide these young people with the supports, resources and permanent connections to obtain higher education, stable employment, medical insurance and safe, stable and affordable housing. If a young person does not have an adequate job, he or she cannot afford housing. And if a young person is employed without insurance or benefits, he or she may be putting their job and housing at risk if they become sick. Like others, many facets of a youth's life are connected, making it even more important to support ALL areas of a young person's life before they are discharged from foster care. *No foster youth should be discharged from foster care without access to higher education, employment, medical insurance, safe, stable and affordable housing and a permanent connection.*