

Policy Analysis on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

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Abstract

Youth aging out of foster care every year pose a potential security and financial liability to society (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). Although several policies and programs exist for these young adults, limited evidence exists as to the efficacy of these programs (Courtney et al., 2011). Further funding and program evaluation are needed, as well as a more clearly defined continuity of services to young adults in the process of aging out of foster care. Politicians must rise to the occasion to modify funding in existence, and advocate to effectively care for this vulnerable population (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016).

Youth aging out of foster care are not prepared for adulthood, which is a national crisis for the future of society. Although such youth are the future, they currently have a frightening risk of incarceration, living in poverty, becoming homeless, and lacking basic skills for living independently (National Youth in Transition Database, 2014). If the country at large is not willing to invest in youth aging out of foster care now, they will far exceed the investment cost by paying for these youths later in jails, food stamps, and a subgroup lacking skills to contribute to society (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). While several options exist for youth aging out, limited studies exist as to which programs work and should continue to receive funding (Valentine, Skemer, & Courtney, 2015). The solution to youth aging out is to first study programs created to help youth aging out, and then fund evidence-based programs nation-wide (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016). Congress should allocate more resources to researching what is effective, and then fund programs that make a difference. Programs designed to help these aging out youth are developing merit, and they deserve funding to expand their programs and educate young adults on access to these resources (Valentine et al., 2015). Advocacy groups must come together to educate politicians on this social problem, encourage the funding for studies, and then utilize promising programs for the youth aging out of foster care. Ultimately, the government is responsible for funding evidence-based programs to help youth aging out of foster care.

Each heading in this article exposes the problems of youth aging out and reveals the most responsible process and decision. First, one must become familiar with a specific social problem or issue of youth aging out of foster care. Next comes identifying the array of options to help these youth, comparing the relative merits of each competing option. After evaluating the lack of positive programs, the researcher drafts a proposal and seeks supporters for the proposal. Key presentations are crucial for the proposal's success, and the conclusion of this article evaluates the issue of youth aging out of foster care.

Familiarize Oneself with a Specific Social Problem or Issue

Youth aging out of foster care fare worse than their peers, lacking “financial resources as well as family and other supports, placing them at risk for developmental disruptions and other negative outcomes” such as low educational attainment, homelessness, health problems, employment issues, and financial difficulties (Paul-Ward & Landon-Polovina, 2016, p. 2). Youths aging out of foster care are also more likely to have lower grades, drop out of high school, find less than full-time employment,

and spend their working lives at or below the poverty line. Youths with a history of poverty or trauma are also at a greater risk for mental health problems (Paul-Ward & Landon-Polovina, 2016). Also, a correlation exists between the adult homeless population and those who have a history in foster care. Further research found correlations between youth in foster care and substance use, mental health diagnoses, and poor work history (Patterson, Moniruzzaman, & Somers, 2015). In congruence with this study, another cohort found that foster youth may have a sense of “learned helplessness” (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). Youth in foster care have every decision made for them, so they have not developed the habit of making decisions for themselves. This helplessness also stems from the trauma the foster children endured at a young age as well as moving from foster family to foster family (Gomes et al., 2015).

Conservative estimates find that one in five will become homeless after 18; at age 24, only half will be employed; less than three percent will have earned a college degree; 71% of women will be pregnant by 21; and one in four will have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder at twice the rate of United States war veterans. Too often, many are at risk of moving back into government systems—from juvenile centers to prison (Soronen, 2014).

In addition to the studies and journal articles, a National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey also reports data on the well-being of foster care youth aging out of custody. The NYTD shows youth in foster care have many risk factors that could potentially harm a youth’s ability to succeed as an adult. The study compared foster care youth at age 17 and age 19. A number of youth had risk factors at age 17, including homelessness, drug use, and incarceration (National Youth In Transition Database, 2014). At age 19, several of the youth continued to have substance use issues, 24% were incarcerated over the past couple of years, and 12% had children. Youth aging out of foster care are also at greater risk for homelessness. Out of the NYTD surveyed youth, 19% of males and 20% of females reported being homeless at some point between ages 17 and 19. The NYTD survey showed that those who are no longer in foster care at age 19 were at the greatest risk of becoming homeless. Moreover, the NYTD survey shows that females who had children by age 17 were more likely to have another child by age 19. However, the NYTD survey shows that youths who had some support with at least one positive adult at age 17 were more likely to continue that relationship until 19 (National Youth In Transition Database, 2014). The NYTD

survey reports hope for young adults and that policies regarding young adults aging out can continue to be developed. Some states have worked hard to extend foster care to 21, but resources for older youth are limited and difficult to access. A Health and Human Services report found that the Foster Care Independence program meant to help foster children make the transition to adulthood is inconsistent from state to state, and it provides too little for these troubled young people (Soronen, 2014).

Congress has recognized youth aging out of foster care as a problem, and it thereby passed the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Per the National Indian Child Welfare Association, the Foster Care Independence Act has increased funding to children aging out of foster care and changed some of the eligibility requirements. The act also allocates funds for youth that are already out of foster care but under age 21. Some of the money can be used to help with the cost of housing (Summary of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, 2016). The Foster Care Independence Act also allocates a portion of the funds to help with employment and continuing education (Social Security Administration, 1999). The funds provide

assistance in obtaining a high school diploma, secondary education, career exploration, housing, vocational training, job placement and retention, training in budgeting, substance abuse prevention education, and education in preventive health measures including smoking avoidance, nutrition education, and pregnancy prevention. (Social Security Administration, 1999, para 21)

The Social Security Administration also includes the fact that Medicaid expanded its coverage to “18, 19, and 20-year-olds who have left foster care” (Social Security Administration, 1999, para 21). A John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence program is funded by the Foster Care Independence Act and aids youth aging out in several independent living areas (Children’s Bureau 2012).

Courtney et al. (2011) evaluated the Foster Care Independence Act, comparing youths in the states of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. By age 26, youth who had aged out of foster care had significantly less education, both high school and post-secondary education, when compared to the youth in the general population. A high percentage of these 26-year-old former foster youth were also living at or below the poverty line. To be exact, “two-thirds of the young women and 42 % of the young men reported that they had been food stamp recipients” (Courtney et al., 2011, p. 43). The study reports that children who can stay in foster care until age 21 generally fare better than those

who exit custody at age 18. The study also emphasizes that programs need further evaluation to determine efficacy. Therein lies a crucial problem: youth aging out still struggle, even though laws and funds exist to help them (Courtney et al. 2011). Congress must allocate more funds in the Foster Care Independence Act for studies evaluating programs to help youth aging out, and it must then demand funding for programs that work.

Identify an Array of Relevant Options

Advocates for youth aging out of foster care must consider a variety of options when looking at the lack of research for programs aiding youth who age out of foster care. Currently, the Chaffee Independence program allocates only a very small percentage of funds for studying program efficacy (McDaniel et al., 2014). Because these youths have varied backgrounds and experiences, they need a personalized program to “meet each youth’s individual needs rather than provided uniformly to all youth in care” (McDaniel et al., 2014, p. 3). The options available to youth aging out have limited documented efficacy (McDaniel et al., 2014). Therefore, researchers must conduct more studies regarding youth aging out and the programs created to help them (McDaniel et al., 2014).

One program out of Illinois is the Community Assistance Programs (CAP) (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010). The CAP is a four-week classroom and job-practice training program, and it provides subsidized employment at the end of training (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010). This program specifically targets employment and does not touch other aspects of adult living, such as filling out a housing lease or balancing a budget. Moreover, of the “298 foster youth who were the focus of our study, 42% were placed in at least one subsidized job but only 26 % completed at least 1 hour of employment at subsidized jobs in which they were placed” (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010, p. 31). The researchers indicate that the lack of participation may be due to youth expressing interest in one type of job but getting assigned to a job that held little to no interest to them (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010). This study noted that the program had limited funds, and the study was limited to one county (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010). Furthermore, the study was performed “for administrative purposes rather than for research” (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010, p. 33). Thus, Dworsky and Havlicek conclude that more researchers need to study the programs designed to help youth aging out in order to determine their effectiveness (2010).

Like CAPs, a plethora of other programs exist to help solve part of the problem of youth aging out. The Covenant House exists to help homeless young

adults, including those aging out of foster care. They provide temporary housing for those that have no place to live, and they advocate for change within the foster care system. This program focuses on two aspects: homelessness and awareness (“Foster Care,” 2016). The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which influences policy for youth aging out, produced the Opportunity Passport. The Opportunity Passport aims to help youth aging out financially by helping the youth set up a bank account and matching the funds the youth contributes (Kunchinski, Peters, & Sherraden, 2012). A resource website for youth aging out reports an organization for youth if they are going to college, an organization with inspiring stories of youth aging out, and a workbook developed to help youth aging out of foster care (“Aging Out Institute,” 2016). Each program serves youth aging out in part of their struggles, but most fail to support the whole of the vulnerable young adult.

The Youth Villages YVLifeSet Program is another program that serves vulnerable young adults. Valentine, Skemer, and Courtney of the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation evaluated the efficacy of the YVLifeSet Program with positive outcomes (2015). Using “evidence-informed tools, counseling, and action-oriented activities,” YVLifeSet teaches independent living skills to these young adults (Valentine et al., 2015, p. 4). The YVLifeSet Program targets six main areas: “employment and earnings, housing stability and economic well-being, health and safety . . . education, social support, and criminal involvement” (Valentine et al., 2015, p. 10-11). YVLifeSet improved the outlook for youth aging out of foster care in the subjects of “earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being” (Valentine et al., 2015, p. 7). Although the YVLifeSet program did not improve all six targeted areas in a participant’s life, it has the best outcomes compared to other programs that serve vulnerable young adults. Again, the study emphasized the need for more research regarding programs aimed at helping youth who are aging out of the foster care system (Valentine et al., 2015). If research does not somehow show that a program is effective, then Congress should question whether that program should continue to receive funding.

Compare the Relative Merits of Competing Options

Although each competing program has merit, none of the previously mentioned programs is evidence-based to the point of providing nation-wide recommendations for youth aging out of foster care. For example, the CAPs program is a classroom based program, which yielded few positive results and had one study with no research purpose (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2010). The Foster Care Coalition, Jim

Casey Youth Opportunities Act, and numerous other organizations aim to alleviate the problem of youth aging out (“Aging Out Institute,” 2016). The YVLifeSet has one randomized control trial, which produced positive results in three out of six portions of the study, but this is not an impressive study (Valentine et al., 2015). If Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation receives no more funds for research, YVLifeSet is the best evidence-based option for youth aging out of foster care (Valentine et al., 2015). Despite the relative success of YVLifeSet, however, more studies on this issue need to be funded; funding programs that do not make a difference in the lives of foster care youth risks condemning foster youth to poverty and subsequent hardships in life.

Per an interview with A. Rivera, a national policy advocate for youth aging out of foster care, the overall problem is that research over the last 16 years has yielded few results about what works for young adults (November 2016). Programs may or may not work, and at this point policy advocates have very few randomized control trials to prove program efficacy (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016). Since the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, youth are still behind their peers in their ability to be contributing adult members of society (Courtney et al., 2011). Several competing options exist to help foster youth who age out, and Congress must re-evaluate which programs receive funding before backing a specific program. Each of the programs listed says that it benefits youth aging out, but very little quantitative or qualitative evidence exists. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) must modify funding and work collaboratively with the states to fund studies adequately and, consequently, programs proving to make a difference (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016).

Draft a Proposal

Currently, advocates for youth aging out are already hard at work in Washington, D.C. to make changes for these vulnerable young adults. The YVLifeSet program employs an advocate who is working on a national proposal to fund further studies of programs aimed at helping youth aging out of foster care. Although yet to be formally presented, the rough-draft proposal includes the mission to “promote the growth of promising and innovative programs for improving the outcomes of transition-age foster youth; and the development and dissemination of a robust evidence-base on what works for improving outcomes” (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016).

Fiscally, each youth aging out is costing approximately \$300,000 over their lifetime (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). Similarly, another group of researchers have found the cost of youth aging out to be “approximately \$20,800 per year”

per young adult aging out of foster care (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009, p. 2). The solution is to fund programs that help youth aging out and save the government money.

To save the government money in the long-run, the proposal asks that there be an amendment to the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to allocate funds “to be used for research and development of innovative and promising approaches with the long-term goal of improving the employment, education, housing, mental health, financial stability, and/or criminal involvement outcomes of transition-age foster youth” (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016). The primary funding source will be from the CFCIP, but states and counties will also contribute and work with non-profit businesses and philanthropists to fund the studies and the programs themselves. The first phase suggests a 12-month study, where the “state and major county welfare agencies” participate in the grant program. The grant applicants will identify youth aging out or a subgroup of the population, current needs in the area for these youth, and “potential innovative or promising programs that would address identified needs of transition age foster in the state or county” (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016). The proposal suggests capping the grants at 20 program participants for the first phase, with the total funding at \$2.5 million divided among the grants.

Those programs that complete phase one will then be eligible for phase two, with grant amounts for \$2 million for innovative programs, or \$5 million for promising programs, over 5 years. The difference in an innovative and promising program is the number of randomized control trials already conducted for the program. The final phase is to fund collaboration between states that have evidence-based programs and states that lack services for youth aging out. Those states that have completed the first two phases will then create a model to be used for states nationwide and produce a list of evidence-based programs which states must utilize to receive funds from the CFCIP (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016). The states will then choose from the evidence-based program list. The policy is an effective proposal. The proposal leaves some ambiguity, by giving some decisions to the states. This is an excellent strategy, considering that the current political climate supports state sovereignty. This policy implementation will require collaboration between legislators on all levels of government, as well as philanthropists, community organizations, not-for-profit organizations, and the youth aging out of foster care. It will require great commitment and cooperation, but helping this vulnerable population is worth the effort.

Seeking Supporters for the Proposal

For the policy proposal to modify the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, the policy proposal needs support from all levels of government and from those not in government offices. Some of the stakeholders involved with policies regarding youth aging out of foster care include the state departments over children's services as well as judges, lawyers, probation officers, mental health providers, government and non-profit employment agencies, banks, those involved in the education system, and the youth aging out of the foster care system (Valentine et al., 2015). Specifically, for this proposal to amend the CFCIP, foster care advocacy groups who support the proposal must seek additional support from lawmakers and the public. Policy support includes support from advocacy groups and philanthropic support, such as the Casey Foundation, which supports the YVLifeSet program out of Youth Villages (Valentine et al., 2015). The MDRC study of the YVLifeSet Program was funded by "The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation" (Youth Villages, 2015, p. 2). Another example of philanthropic support is from the Day Foundation, which donated \$42 million to Youth Villages to expand the YVLifeSet Program (Rutschman & Luecke, 2011). This kind of support is crucial in aiding to fund future studies for youth aging out.

Furthermore, government support is as crucial as philanthropic support. An example of key state supporters is already in place in Tennessee. The support came in 2013 from Gov. Bill Haslam and Tennessee Department of Children's Services Commissioner Jim Henry who "committed to helping Youth Villages offer the program to every young person who ages out of state custody in Tennessee" (Youth Villages, 2015, p. 1). The state matched funds to Youth Villages to expand services. This unprecedented act of support is a great example of a collaborative effort between state officials and non-profits. Although Mr. Henry is no longer the current Commissioner, he can exert his personal influence over his contacts to support policy change. This type of support can continue with the proposal to modify funds to research programs and fund the evidence-based programs.

Another government official in support of young adults is U.S. Representative Jim Cooper, who was involved with National Adoption Month ("Jim Cooper on Families and Children," 2016). Likewise, Congresswoman Diane Black, who has ties with the YVLifeSet program, is an additional government supporter of evidence-based programs for youth aging out of foster care (Youth Villages, 2016). On the other

side of the country is U.S. Representative Karen Bass, who supported a proposal to extend the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to youth up to age 23 (“Legislation,” 2016). Each of these government officials can be utilized to form a collaborative group dedicated to creating legislation for evidence-based programs for youth aging out of foster care.

Not only should government officials support policy to help youth aging out, but many non-profits should sponsor the policy for evidence-based programs. Youth Villages is a non-profit supporting youth aging out and is a key supporter of the policy to fund evidence-based programs (A. Rivera, personal interview, 2016). In addition to advocacy on a national level, Youth Villages works on a state and local level to advocate for foster youth aging out (K. Mullins, phone interview, November 7, 2016). Youth Villages advocates support by utilizing youth speaking to the government officials and sharing their struggles and successes (K. Mullins, phone interview, November 7, 2016). Advocates also create key partnerships with other community resources, and they work to spread awareness of the struggles for this population, and the YVLifeSet program designed to help them (K. Mullins, phone interview, November 7, 2016).

Community relationships with those who already work with youth aging out of foster care is fundamental for fostering support for a policy proposal. The grassroots effort of staying connected with state workers, foster parents, lawyers, judges, and even the youths aging out of foster care is also important. Thus, target audiences turn into advocates for policy change. Specifically, for this proposal, a YVLifeSet advocate can reach out to youth aging out, who then share their success stories with government officials, who then advocate at a state or national level for policy change (K. Mullins, phone interview, November 7, 2016). Ultimate support for the proposed change to the CFCIP needs a sponsor at the federal level, but advocacy comes from all types of people and organizations. These relationships are important for supporting the policy proposal to modify CFCIP funding for evidence-based programs (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016).

Make Key Presentations

The first target audience to consider are the young adults who would be eligible to participate in the study. Accordingly, this would include youth turning 17 in Department of Children’s Services (DCS) custody but would also include those recently aged out, up to age 21. Youth aging out must learn that their voice is important and become empowered to self-advocacy. NYTD survey representatives will contact youth and ask for their input, explain the upcoming proposal to the youth in clear,

easy-to-understand terms, and emphasize the importance of youth participation. The purpose of this presentation to the young adults are to elicit a response in order to determine if the youth is receptive to participating in another study. NYTD representatives must collaborate with the state department to obtain the contact information for these youth and allocate three to six months for preparing youth to become their own advocates (National Youth in Transition Database, 2014).

The second target audience are the legislators and legislative staff who will support and vote on the policy proposal. Legislators can use expert power, which occurs “when senders display their personal credentials and knowledge to convince others” (Jansson, 2014, p. 328). They do this by using the credentials of and the work done by the Casey Foundation and the example of the MDRC study already complete (Valentine et al., 2015). Legislators can also utilize value-based power, which “is derived from a person’s ability to appeal to others based upon their shared ethical commitments” (Jansson, 2014, p. 330). The legislator can connect with other legislators who are already advocating for youth aging out (“Legislation,” 2016).

On the national level, Karen Bass is an excellent target for supporting this change in funds for researching programs that aim to support youth aging out (“Legislation,” 2016). Furthermore, this advocate can reach out to conservatives, emphasizing the \$300,000 per youth, and the nearly \$7 billion dollars per year, for each cohort of youth aging out (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). Senators and representatives can utilize process power, which occurs when they work to “influence the tenor, tempo, or scope of conflict of deliberations in order to get a specific proposal enacted” (Jansson, 2014, p. 335). The congressmen do so by proposing the policy as a win-win situation, since the proposal utilizes already-existing funds with an emphasis on efficiency (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016). Although this proposal has the potential to drastically change and efficiently aid youth aging out, it is not a policy in need of mass media attention. Key supporters at local, state, and national levels can support this proposal by reaching out to the national legislators through email and phone calls (K. Mullins, phone interview, November 7, 2016). Keeping in mind that some conservatives oppose allocation of funds as “handouts,” the proposal should be the most efficient and cost-effective solution.

Using power and discretion are keys to getting the policy proposed and pushed through legislation, but the point is mute if the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program lacks the connections with those who will carry out the studies. Thus, the need for working with a task group, which will “focus on producing or

influencing something external to the group itself” (Jansson, 2014, p. 402). Organizations such as the Casey Foundation advocate for youth aging out and seek to influence policy. The Casey Foundation collaborated with MDRC to produce the randomized control trial for the YVLifeSet program (Valentine et al., 2015). Therefore, the MDRC should conduct the future studies proposed in the change to the CFCIP. They are the final target audience for the proposal to modify CFCIP.

Conclusion

Consequently, youth aging out are not prepared for adulthood, and the programs that currently exist have little evidence that they help their target population (Valentine et al., 2015). Youth aging out pose a financial risk to society, and it is also fiscally responsible to limit funding to only evidence-based programs (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). The government keeps these youth in custody until they turned 18. Therefore, they are responsible for helping them become successful young adults. Since very few randomized control trials currently exist, funding for more studies necessary to better utilize funds set aside to help youth aging out (Valentine et al., 2015). The solution is to first study programs created to help youth aging out, and then fund evidence-based programs nation-wide (A. Rivera, personal interview, November 2016). Community advocates, philanthropists, non-profits, and legislators are among those who can make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable young adults (K. Mullins, phone interview, November 7, 2016). These stakeholders must work together to pass legislation to better utilize funds for programs to help our most vulnerable youth aging out of foster care.

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