

# **Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**

**Identifying Strategies and Best Practices**



**2007-08 Presidential Initiative**

February 2008

# Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

## Identifying Strategies and Best Practices

2007-2008 Presidential Initiative

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### About NACo – The Voice of America's Counties

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation's 3,066 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public's understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org).

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# Introduction

In the last decade the issue of youth aging out of the foster care system has garnered increased attention from state and local officials.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, research has focused on how this population of young people has fared after emancipating from the foster care system.<sup>2</sup> In June 2007, NACo President, Eric Coleman set forth a presidential initiative which addressed the devastating impact<sup>3</sup> of youth aging out of foster care.<sup>4</sup> At the helm of this initiative, NACo has partnered with the Pew Charitable Trusts to raise awareness among county officials about the plight of young adults aging out of foster care, with the hope of identifying county practices that support such youth as they transition to independent adulthood.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, children are placed into the foster care system primarily because of abuse, neglect, uncontrollable behavior or dependence. Foster care is intended to be a *temporary* service,<sup>5</sup> with a goal of reunifying children with their parents whenever possible. However, an increasing proportion of children who enter the foster care system do not achieve reunification with their parents, and live in foster care until they reach the age of majority, which in most states is 18 years of age.<sup>6</sup>

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, of the approximately 500,000 children in the foster care system in the United States, an estimated 24,000 foster youth age out of care each year and attempt

to live independently. These youth are expected to succeed on their own long before a vast majority of their peers. The transition to adulthood for youth who age out of foster care is burdened with challenges, and more specific supports and services are required to help them overcome extremely difficult circumstances. Not surprisingly, the research that exists on outcomes for foster care alumni shows that these youth are at a higher risk for homelessness, unemployment, illness, incarceration, welfare dependency, and sexual and physical victimization than their peers.<sup>7</sup>

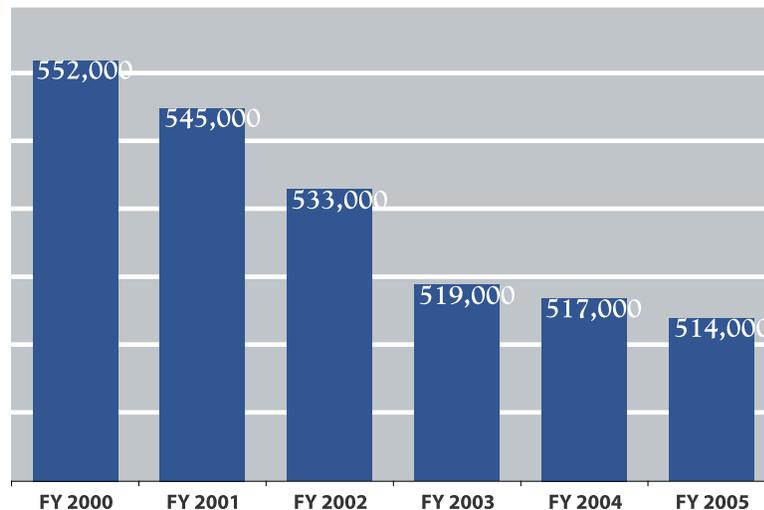
County governments play an important role in the foster care system and operate the child welfare system in 13 states.<sup>8</sup> While the responsibility of counties in administering the child welfare system differs among states, all counties in the United States are responsible for providing access to the social safety net that young adults aging out of foster care need to succeed in their lives and in their communities. County governments are at the forefront of providing services to former foster youth, including access to housing, education, training and job placement, and health care.

The first section of this brief will outline the current federal framework addressing youth aging out of foster care. The second will identify general outcomes for youth aging out of care and a third will highlight model county programs and best practices that are addressing the needs of this population in an innovative way.



An estimated 24,000 foster youth age out of care each year and attempt to live independently.

## Trends: Children in the Foster Care System (Number of children per fiscal year)



**Figure 1:** The chart shows the number of children in the foster care system for fiscal years 2000-2005. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, AFCARS data

# ■ Establishing a Federal Framework

Federal legislation has created a framework for assisting youth who are aging out of foster care. Since 1985 federal law has recognized that older youth in foster care deserve funding for special programs and services. In that year, the Independent Living Program was added to the Social Security Act.<sup>9</sup> In 1999, the law was further amended by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA),<sup>10</sup> to respond to the limitations and perceived ineffectiveness of the Independent Living Program. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act continues to be the central framework for child welfare legislation.

## 1. The Chafee Bill: Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP)

The Foster Care Independence Act, which renamed the Independent Living Program, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, expanded eligibility for independent living services to youth and doubled the funding available to states to provide these services. The CFCIP offers assistance to help current and former foster youth achieve self-sufficiency. Funding is offered to states that submit a plan to assist youth. Under this program, states can use federal funding and matching state dollars to provide support for youth transitioning from foster care to independent living.<sup>11</sup>

### Program Overview:

- Expands eligibility for independent living services to youth ages 18-21
- Provides \$140 million in annual funding to states for providing independent living services programs.<sup>12</sup>
- States are required to contribute 20 percent in matching funds.
- Many states and localities choose to supplement CFCIP funds with their own dollars, or private funds.
- To receive funds, states must provide written transitional independent living plans based on the needs of each youth.
- Gives states flexibility to decide what services they will provide with the funds they receive.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The Chafee Education and Training Vouchers Program (ETV)

The Chafee ETV program makes financial resources available to meet the post secondary education and training needs of youth aging out of foster care and enrolled in a qualified higher education program.

### Program Overview:

- Authorizes \$60 million in discretionary payments to states for post-secondary educational and training vouchers for youth who age out of foster care.
- Provides vouchers up to \$5,000 per year, per youth for post secondary education.

## 3. The Chafee Option

Currently, states provide health care for children and youth who are in foster care through Medicaid. However, upon ex-

iting care, youth typically lost their eligibility for Medicaid coverage, leaving many uninsured. In an attempt to provide a bridge between their Medicaid coverage as children and their coverage as young adults, states have used various mechanisms to extend Medicaid coverage for this population. In 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act was signed into law. The legislation included an option for states to extend Medicaid coverage to foster youth up to age 21.

### Program Overview:

- Allows states to extend Medicaid coverage for youth who have aged out of care up to the age of 21.

## 4. Family Unification Program (FUP)

Funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the FUP offers housing assistance and transitional assistance for youth who age out of care. Funds are provided to agencies that referred youth to the program.

### Program Overview:

- Provides time limited housing vouchers to eligible youth between the ages of 18 and 21 who left foster care after age 16.

## 5. Youthbuild

Authorized as the “Hope for Youth,” program in 1992, under the Housing and Community Development Act of 1992<sup>14</sup>, Youthbuild provides grants on a competitive basis to assist high-risk youth between the ages of 16-24 to learn housing construction job skills and to complete their high school education. Program participants enhance their skills as they construct and/or rehabilitate affordable housing for very low income, and homeless persons or families. During the past 7 years, HUD has released more than \$300 million in grants to Youthbuild programs around the nation.<sup>15</sup>

### Program Overview:

- Awards competitive grants to state and local governments or any organization eligible to provide education and employment training under federal employment training programs.
- Applicants must submit specific information about a proposed project in their application.<sup>16</sup>
- Funding Categories:
  - Category 1- Reserved for new applicants. Grants are available for \$400,000 or less for activities not to exceed 30 months
  - Category 2- Grants are available for \$700,000 or less for activities not to exceed 30 months.
  - Category 3- Grants are available for \$400,000 or less to establish programs in underserved and rural areas not to exceed 30 months.

**This section has described the federal framework addressing the issue of youth aging out of foster care. The next section will identify general outcomes which confront this population.**

# ■ Identifying General Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Care

Foster youth who age out of care are more susceptible to elevated rates of homelessness, poor educational outcomes, low wages, unemployment, health issues, and incarceration according to the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth Study (“Midwest Study”),<sup>17</sup> conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, in 2007. The study, which is the most comprehensive examination of youth leaving foster care, examined the outcomes of 732 foster youth who aged out of care in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. The findings indicate that such youth experience numerous difficulties after leaving their care settings. The most significant obstacles facing youth who age out of care include lack of support for education, housing, health care and employment.

## Education

Although all children are entitled to education services under federal, state, and local laws, the specific educational needs of children and youth in care often go unmet. Research suggests that foster youth approach the transition to adulthood with significant educational deficits. According to the Midwest Study, young adults who age out of foster care are “more than twice as likely not to have a high school diploma or a GED as their peers.” Conversely, only “30 percent of the young adults in the Midwest Study had completed any college compared with 53 percent of 21- year olds nationally.” In fact, the youth interviewed in the Midwest Study were “14 times less likely to complete college than the general population.”

Clearly there are some discrepancies in the educational achievement of youth in care when compared to youth not in care. Whether these discrepancies are due to a lack of ability, due to a non-supportive home life, or minimal residential stability, there is one thing apparent: youth in care tend to fare worse educationally than the general population of youth that reside with their families.

## Housing and Homelessness

Housing is one of the most immediate needs for youth who age out of the foster care system. Former foster youth are often prematurely confronted with the harsh reality of the gap between the wages they earn and the cost of housing. As a result, young people aging out of the foster care system are becoming homeless at disconcerting rates. Most of the young adults in the Midwest Study sample had been living in fairly stable living arrangements since their discharge from care. Nevertheless, “one-third had lived in at least three different places, of those at least 40 percent had lived in four or more places.” More than 18 percent of those who aged out of care have been homeless at least twice, and more than half of these young adults had been homeless more than once. In fact, “three in ten of the nation’s homeless adults report foster care history.”<sup>18</sup>

Midwest Study findings are supported by other studies. For example, the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study indicates that 25 percent of foster youth state they have experienced homelessness at least one night within the last 2.5 to 4 years.<sup>19</sup>

## Healthcare

For young people leaving foster care, lack of health care poses a substantial challenge. Researchers have been studying and reporting on the prevalence of health and mental health problems plaguing children in foster care for several decades. According to a recent study, approximately twenty-five percent of foster care alumni or adults who had experienced foster care later experienced post-traumatic stress. The general population by comparison experiences post traumatic stress at a rate of 4 percent.<sup>20</sup>

Most youth in foster care receive healthcare through Medicaid and are at risk of losing this coverage once they age out of care. The Midwest study indicates that only half of the young adults reported having medical insurance, and only 39 percent had dental insurance. Approximately one-fifth of the young adults reported that they had not received medical care in the past year. Not having insurance was the main reason cited for not receiving care. It is abundantly clear that access to adequate health, mental health and other support services is a critical factor as young people transition to adulthood.

## Employment

The Midwest Study findings indicate that only 72 percent of youth who aged out of care worked for pay in the previous year, and only 47 percent were employed at the time of the survey. Additionally, of those who did work for pay, 84 percent made less than \$9.00 an hour. These employment outcomes show that youth may struggle to survive financially. In fact, of those surveyed, 40 percent reported not having enough money to buy clothes, 20 percent did not have enough money to pay rent, and 22 percent had their phone service disconnected. Lastly, 15 percent of participants reported being hungry because they could not afford to buy food.

**State and county governments are making an effort to address the negative outcomes that often plague youth who age out of foster care. In the next section, strategies to improve such outcomes will be highlighted, along with innovative best practice solutions developed by county governments all over the nation.**

# Strategies to Improve Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Care

Several programs and services can help youth in transition become independent self-sufficient adults. The delivery and financing of these programs and services varies greatly among state and county governments. States and localities can use different funding sources to help to help youth aging out of foster care, including federal Title IV-E funds, state funds and private funds. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) gives states flexibility to decide what services they will provide with the funds they receive. Although many programs can benefit youth in transition, some of the more common and well-documented services that state and county governments are using to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care are vocational and educational training, housing, healthcare and employment services.

## Education Strategies

Education is known to be the leading predictor of adult success. Education supports are essential to facilitating higher graduation rates of foster care youth from high school and post-secondary institutions. All 50 states have reported helping youth prepare for or complete education or vocational training, through state or county implemented programs. States which continue to service youth in transition or those who permit youth to remain in care past age 18 provide extended opportunities for youth to complete high school, attain their GED certificate or begin post-secondary education programs.

The Chafee Education and Training Vouchers Program allots eligible youth up to \$5,000 annually that may be used for post-secondary education related expenses. While many states already offer college scholarships to youth in transition, states can receive additional funds by taking advantage of the TRIO educational opportunity outreach programs that aim to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Education Best Practices

- **Peirce County, WA: “Foster Care to College Mentoring Program.”** The Foster Care to College Mentoring Program is one piece of the Foster Care to College Partnership. The partnership is a visionary initiative, which demonstrates the best efforts of communities, private entities and government collaborating to improve the quality of life for foster youth. Foster Care to College mentors work one-on-one with foster youth ages 14-21 to help them define their ongoing educational goals. Regular meetings with educational mentors help students identify and fine-tune their unique educational plans. This in turn, provides direction for students to develop required academic skills, visit college campuses or vocational schools of their choice and learn about applying for financial aid.

- **Lorain County, OH: “Children Services Board Agency”** The agency has developed an excellent model to prepare youth to become productive, self-sufficient young adults by

strongly encouraging all youth to further their education by attending a college, university or vocational school. This encouragement is supported by an educational awareness campaign, whereby youth are constantly made aware of the benefits of furthering their education. Additionally, the Children Services Board Agency will pay the youths’ rent for up to five years, while they complete a post-secondary education or training program.

- **CA: “Guardian Scholars Program”** This innovative program, available only to California residents, admits several foster care youth each semester to California State University. Each scholar receives full tuition and funding for textbooks, supplies and annual fees. Additionally, the program offers year-round, on-campus housing and on-campus student employment, as well as assistance with off-campus employment in the young person’s career field. Post-graduation career planning is also an option.

## Housing Strategies

Currently, the CFCIP allows states to use up to 30 percent of their federal funds to provide room and board for youth up to age 21, who have aged out of foster care. However, the housing supply is limited because of the high cost of living in many counties, and the lack of availability of suitable housing. According to Roxana Torrico, of the Child Welfare League of America, “the best transitional living programs combine subsidized housing with case management and life skills training.”<sup>21</sup>

California counties have made substantial progress in developing innovative housing options for youth who age out of care.

## Housing Best Practices

- **Los Angeles County, CA: “Step Out Apartments”** Represents a collaborative effort on the part of county officials and administrators to provide transitional housing and supportive services for 20 recently emancipated and emotionally disabled young adults.

- **San Diego County, CA: “Emancipated Foster Youth Transitional Housing Program”** This program provides rental assistance to 52 former foster youth between the ages of 18-21, providing them an opportunity to live in housing units distributed throughout San Diego County for a period of two years. The uniqueness of the program design provides for supportive services, housing assistance and stability while youth obtain employment, establish rental histories and work towards self-sufficiency.

- **San Mateo County, CA: “First Place Fund”** This fund, was founded in 1998 to reduce the rates of homelessness and poverty among youth who are making the difficult transition

from foster care to independent living. The fund has helped over 310 former foster youth to live for up to two years in safe, affordable apartment units spread around East Bay, CA. About 85 percent of the program's graduates have continued to live in stable housing, sometimes in the same units, after the fund's services have ended.

The program costs the agency about \$21,600 a year per youth. Funding initially came from private donations and grants from foundations and the city of Oakland. Then in October 2003, the agency tapped into the state of California's Transitional Housing Placement program, known as THP-Plus. Under THP-Plus, counties can draw money from the state program but must provide local funds equal to 60 percent of the project cost- a requirement that likely reduces participation in California.

First Place Fund's success has persuaded other counties that the benefits are worth the money and the trouble. This year, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Los Angeles, Kern and Lassen counties are expected to tap into THP-Plus funds in order to implement transitional housing programs.

- **Alameda County, CA: "Foster Youth Alliance"** An offshoot of the First Place Fund, the Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance is collaborating with Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) in the statewide Campaign for Safe Transitions for Foster Youth to build public support for helping emancipated foster youth with housing. The campaign is currently pushing a bill in the state legislature that would increase the state fund to \$10 million, lower the county match to 40 percent, and extend the eligibility to age 23.

- **Sacramento County, CA: "LaVerne Adolfo Transitional Housing Program for Former Foster Youth"** The Adolfo

program is a two year transitional living program for young adults 18 to 24 who have aged out of the foster care system. The services provided at the program's three sites include: living skills training, housing, employment and educational services, and counseling in a semi-independent environment.

- **Miami-Dade County, FL: "Casa Valentina"** This is an innovative residential program that addresses the unique gender specific needs of young women transitioning from foster care to independent living. The organization provides young women who age out of foster care with safe, affordable housing as well as comprehensive case management and life skills programs. Community groups provide residents with additional services, including: mentoring, counseling, tutoring, job coaching, community service projects and enrichment programs.

## Healthcare Strategies

Recognizing the specific challenges faced by youth who are exiting foster care, both the federal government and state governments have enacted programs designed to provide a bridge between foster youths' Medicaid coverage as they transition to adulthood. States have used different ways to extend Medicaid coverage for this population. Many states use the *Chafee Option*, which allows states to extend Medicaid eligibility to youth aged 18 to 21 who have aged out of foster care. Alternatively, states may also extend coverage by using other state general funds or other Medicaid options to provide coverage.

## HealthCare Best Practices

- **OH: "ABC Juvenile Justice, Behavioral Health Grants"** Currently, Cuyahoga, Fairfield, Franklin, Logan/Champaign, Montgomery and Union counties are receiving the ABC Juvenile Justice Behavioral Health Grants to fund



"Casa Valentina," in Miami-Dade County, FL, helps young women make their transition from foster care to independent living.

programs which provide assessment and treatment services to more than 900 youth in their communities using “evidence-based” treatments. Some of the grants will be focused on crisis stabilization. Others will focus on youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

## Employment Strategies

According to annual CFCIP state reports, more than 40 states provide employment services to youth, including job readiness training and job-search assistance. Some states also help youth with job placement and ongoing support on the job.

### Employment Best Practices

- **Philadelphia County, PA: “Achieving Independence Center (AI)”** A one stop self-sufficiency center that helps young people achieve their goals. With nontraditional hours, flexible scheduling, and in-house job training, the state of the art AI center provides support and real-life tools for youth who want to invest in their future. A project of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services and the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation, the AI center uses the programs and services of many Philadelphia-based groups dedicated to providing quality programs for youth in the city.

- **Santa Clara County, CA: “Emancipated Foster Youth Employment Program”** Employment services counselors bring employment expertise to Child and Family Services and transitioning foster youth. A streamlined Emancipated Foster Youth (EFY) Development Program allows application for 21 eligible job classifications through one on-line application process.

- **Pinellas County, FL: “WorkNet Year Round Youth Program”** The WorkNet Pinellas County Year Round Youth Program assists youth between the ages of 14 and 20 years old to find employment opportunities. A WorkNet Youth Specialist is available at all of the One-Stop Career Centers to provide support with all aspects of educational and career enhancements.

- **Wayne County, MI: “Creating Independence and Outcomes (CIAO)”** The CIAO program is one of five such programs nationwide, which helps current and former foster youths aged 17 to 20 obtain critical career related skills. In the last three years, about 150 Wayne County youths have learned important skills as they prepare to leave foster care to become self-sufficient adults. The CIAO project is supported by the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth, the Michigan Department of Human Services, and Casey Family Programs.

## Looking Ahead

Substantial progress is being made on the state and county levels to address youth who age out of care. An impressive statewide initiative that achieves comprehensive progress in this area can be found in the California Connected by 25 Initiative (CC25I).<sup>22</sup> The CC25I works with child welfare agencies in five Northern California counties to build comprehensive services for emancipating foster youth ages 14 through 24. CC25I counties coordinate their K-12 education, employment, training, post-secondary education, supportive housing, workforce development, and personal/social asset development services. Through comprehensive assessment, planning and practice innovations developed with youth, caregivers, and other partners, effective strategies are being developed that can be spread to improve outcomes for former foster youth statewide. Project leaders seek to create a national initiative to develop successful strategies to provide a continuum of services and supports for foster youth.

## Conclusion

The population of youth who are aging out of the foster care system each year is on a steady rise. These young people face many challenges which could potentially derail their successful transition to adulthood. Unemployment, poor educational outcomes, homelessness, and inadequate healthcare are all barriers to success. Moreover, youth are at risk for many negative outcomes that could affect their well-being and could also tax their communities. For example, incarceration and substance abuse produce many unforeseen costs.

Given the relatively small number of youth aging out of the foster care system, the total cost of providing services to help them successfully transition to adulthood is cost effective. Helping youth become stable and productive citizens will produce substantial social benefits and would reduce the potentially substantial costs to counties if these youth do not succeed.

## Endnotes

- 1 County governments are responsible for administering the child welfare system in 13 states.
- 2 See Courtney et al., *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 21*, Chicago, IL, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2007.
- 3 According to the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (“Midwest Study”) foster youth who age out of care are more likely to experience homelessness, poor educational outcomes, low wages, unemployment and incarceration than a majority of their peers.
- 4 For more information, See NACo | *President’s Initiatives* NACo 2008
- 5 See Pokempner, Jennifer. *Dependent Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: A Guide for Judges*, Juvenile Law Center, 2003.
- 6 In most states a child reaches emancipation at the age of 18. Upon emancipating from the system, these children lose access to services such as housing, education, and healthcare. Illinois and Vermont are the only states in the nation that use state money to extend foster care services to age 21, if youth choose to remain in the program. See Also, Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (expanding eligibility for independent living services to youth ages 18 to 21 who have aged out of foster care, and doubled the funding available to states to provide such services.)
- 7 See Rashid et al., *A BASSC Policy Monograph: Emancipating From Foster Care In the Bay Area*, San Francisco, CA. Zellerbach Family Foundation, 2006
- 8 States with county administered child welfare systems include: California, North Dakota, Ohio, Colorado, Maryland, Georgia, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Nevada.
- 9 Authorized federal funding of \$70 million per year for states to provide services to youth between the ages of 16 and 18 to help them make the transition from foster care to independent living, distributed through the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). States were required to provide \$25 million in matching funds.
- 10 42 U.S.C. § 677.
- 11 Dunne, Lynda. *Effective Approaches to Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: A Review of Research that is Currently Underway*, Washington, D.C. Voices for America’s Children, 2004.
- 12 Funds are distributed to counties based on an allocation formula.
- 13 The legislation notes that these services may include “assistance in obtaining a high school diploma, career exploration, vocational training, training in daily living skills, training in budgeting and financial management skills, substance abuse prevention, and preventative health activities,” and they may “provide personal and emotional support.” See P.L. 106-169 at [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/programs\\_fund/state\\_tribal/jh\\_chafee.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/programs_fund/state_tribal/jh_chafee.htm).
- 14 Administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).
- 15 See [www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/economicdevelopment/programs/youthbuild/](http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/economicdevelopment/programs/youthbuild/) for more information.
- 16 After HUD publishes a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for the Youtbuild Program, typically once each calendar year.
- 17 *Supra*, note 2.
- 18 Roman, N.P. & Wolfe, N. (1995) Web of Failure: The relationship between foster care and homelessness. National Alliance to End Homelessness
- 19 Pecora, P.J. et al., *Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*, Available online. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.
- 20 Pecora, P.J et al., *Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*, Available online. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs
- 21 Torrico, Roxana. “Funding Innovations for Housing Youth.” Presented at National Alliance to End Homelessness Annual Conference, July 18, 2006.
- 22 Co-funded by the Annie E. Casey, Walter S. Johnson, Schwab, and Hewlett foundations, CC25I builds on the Casey Foundation’s *Family to Family* foster care initiative, by extending services to emancipating foster youth in 25 California counties.



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