



Transitions

Building Better Lives for Youth Leaving Foster Care

Update and Recommendations

September 2005



Children's Action Alliance

Board of Directors

David J. Bodney
Chairman

Laura Almquist	Jaime Gutierrez	Steven W. Lynn
David Bartlett	Nora Hannah	Bruce Merrill
Charles Blanchard	David Howell	Susan Navran
Fred DuVal	Diane Johnsen	Christine Nowaczyk
Kay Ekstrom	Martin Latz	Steve Roman
Armando Flores	Mark Lodato	Brenda Sperduti
Sybil Francis	John Loredó	Carolyn Warner

Carol Kamin, Ph.D.
President/CEO

4001 N. 3rd Street, Suite 160
Phoenix, AZ 85012
(602) 266-0707
www.azchildren.org

2850 N. Swan Road, Suite 160
Tucson, AZ 85712
(520) 795-4199

This report was prepared by Children's Action Alliance with appreciation to Ami Nagle, consultant, who facilitated and compiled focus groups, youth interviews, case studies and updated portions of this report.

We also thank and acknowledge the young adults and agency staff who participated in this project. Special thanks go to Casey Family Programs, Tucson Office, for funding the focus group activity in Southern Arizona in 2002. In addition, we are grateful to the staffs of Tumbleweed, the Court Appointed Special Advocate program, and state agency workgroup members for helping us identify and focus on issues facing youth who are part of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

This project was generously supported by grants from these foundations:

Margaret T. Morris Foundation

J. W. Kieckhefer Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Wallace Foundation of Arizona

Arizona Republic and Channel 12's Season for Sharing



Transitions

Building Better Lives for Youth Leaving Foster Care

**Update and Recommendations
September 2005**





Introduction	8
National Research Findings: Transitioning Youth Face Great Challenges	10
Federal Actions Supporting Youth Transitioning to Independence	12
Arizona’s Services for Transitioning Youth	13
Arizona Foster Youth—By the Numbers	16
Arizona Foster Youth Talk About Transitioning to Independence	21
New and Emerging Issues for Arizona	24
2004-2005 Arizona Progress	26
Recommendations	28
Appendices:	
Appendix A: 2002 Focus Group and Interview Findings: Youth Speak for Themselves	32
Appendix B: Relevant State Laws	44
Appendix C: Endnotes	47

Introduction

The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) is the state agency legally responsible to care for abused, neglected and abandoned children who enter foster care because they cannot remain with their parents or other family members. Unless these children can be returned to the custody of their parents, placed in an adoptive home or with a permanent guardian, they remain in the care and custody of DES until they reach the age of 18.

Historically, age 18 is legally and culturally identified as the beginning of adulthood. At age 18, youth can vote, enlist in the military, and some leave home for college or move out on their own. While eighteen may be the age of majority, nationwide families are experiencing a trend towards longer term responsibility for young adults older than age 18, including continued financial

dependency and remaining at or returning to the parents' home.

A nationwide survey found that Americans believe that on average young adults are not ready to be completely on their own until age 23. A third of survey respondents did not consider them ready to be completely on their own until age 25 or older.¹ These beliefs have recently been confirmed by scientific research that has found that structurally, the brain is still growing and maturing during adolescence. Some scientists say that brain growth matures at age 20; others consider 25 the age at which brain maturation peaks.²

For many youth, late adolescence and early adulthood can be a time of change and uncertainty. For youth in foster care, this time of life may bring more than the usual constellation of worries and questions about managing and coping with adult responsibilities.



Each year hundreds of Arizona youth leave foster care to live on their own. National research shows that these youth from foster care may not have acquired the life skills necessary to handle adult tasks and few have a family support network to fall back on when problems and challenges arise.³ In comparison to other young adults, youth with a foster care history are at greater risk of low educational attainment, homelessness, non-marital childbearing, joblessness, poverty, physical and mental illness, and engaging in or being victims of crimes.⁴

Foster youth who are also involved in the juvenile justice system are at even greater risk. These youth very often are released from the juvenile justice system on their 18th birthday with little or no family support, no home to return to, and few, if any, services to help them live successfully on their own.

With the continuing recognition that these foster youth need extensive assistance to successfully transition to the independence of adulthood, this report revises and updates *Transitions: Building Better Lives for Youth Leaving Foster Care*, published in March 2003. This new edition provides updated information on federal laws and funding, existing state support programs and services to support transitioning youth, findings from focus groups with youth in/from foster care, recent state actions taken to improve transitions for youth, and new and emerging issues since the 2003 report. Although progress has been made in the past two years, much work lies ahead. Recommendations are made to improve the transition experience.

National Research Findings: Transitioning Youth Face Great Challenges

A growing body of research documents that youth preparing to leave foster care have greater challenges and obstacles to independence than children who have not experienced the foster care system. Youth who were formerly in foster care are more likely to face health and mental health problems, homelessness, joblessness, low-educational attainment, substance abuse problems, and incarceration.

National studies of foster youth have found that:

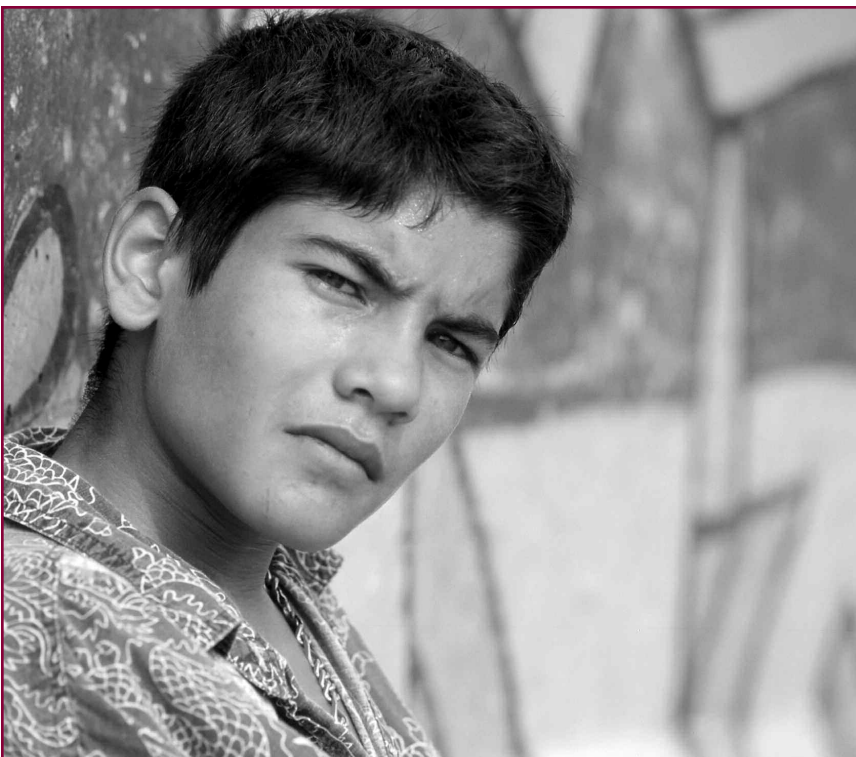
- 66% did not graduate from high school.⁵
- 25% of youth released from the child welfare system were homeless at least one night.⁶
- 30-40% of foster children had physical or emotional difficulties.⁷
- 5% of older youth in care (aged 17.5 or older) had a serious drug problem.⁸

Another study of youth transitioning out of care found that those youth who chose to remain under the care and supervision of the child welfare system beyond the age of 18 experienced better outcomes than those who chose to or were forced to leave care.⁹

- Those who left at 18 were half as likely to be enrolled in school or a training program than those still in care.
- Those who had left care were 50 percent more likely to be unemployed and out of school than those who stayed in.
- About 14 percent of those who left reported finding themselves homeless at some point.
- Of those who left care, 11.5 percent reported sometimes or often not having enough to eat, compared with less than 4 percent of those who stayed in care

Studies also compare these youth with general population benchmarks. Findings include:

- More than half of the foster youth alumni (54%) had current mental health problems, while less than one-quarter of the general U.S. population (22%) had current mental health problems.¹⁰
- The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) within the previous 12 months was significantly higher among foster youth alumni (25%) than among the general U.S. population (4%).¹¹



- The prevalence of major depression within the previous 12 months was significantly higher among alumni (20%) than among the general U.S. population (10%).¹²
- 34% of youth who had been in foster care had illicit drug use versus 22% of youth who had never been in foster care.¹³

While all youth in foster care may approach adulthood with the odds stacked against them, certain youth are at greater risk for negative outcomes—youth placed in group home settings and youth with multiple placements.

Adolescent youth in group homes exhibit the highest level of risk behaviors while youth in kinship care and non-relative foster care show levels of risk behaviors similar to the general population.¹⁴

Foster youth at higher risk of incarceration for a serious or violent offense during adolescence include:

- Children first placed in foster care between the ages of 12 and 15;
- Children with multiple foster care placements and multiple spells of care, and;
- Children who have juvenile corrections placements and are supervised by probation concurrent with or following their experience in the child welfare system.¹⁵

Additionally, an Arizona study found that youth in the foster system

experience many behavioral and emotional problems.¹⁶

Nearly half of Arizona dependent children in foster care ages eight or older had court involvement on a delinquency matter. Problems surrounding dually adjudicated youth (dependent youth who were also on probation) in Maricopa and Pima Counties included:

- 80% with a history of substance abuse
- 61% exhibited severe emotional/mental health problems
- 61% were taking psychotropic medications
- 39% had history of being sexual abused
- 27% seriously considered or had attempted suicide
- 76% had a history of truancy
- 59% had severe academic deficiencies
- 44% had special education needs
- 23% were diagnosed with a learning disability
- Females were more likely than males to have documented substance abuse (91%) and to have been a victim of sexual abuse (64%)¹⁷

Federal Actions Supporting Transitioning Foster Youth

In 1983, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provided a discretionary grant to DES to create a pilot program to provide living skills and assistance to foster youth to prepare them to live independently once they left care. With these federal funds, DES created the Arizona Young Adult Program (AYAP) and offered transition services to selected foster youth in Phoenix and Tucson. For the first time, youth were assigned to specially trained AYAP case managers who worked with youth to develop an individualized case plan structured to help them live successfully on their own.

In 1986, Congress enacted the Federal Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative which provided funding to all the states to establish independent living services for foster youth. DHHS established directives to states regarding the types and scope of services to be provided. By 1999, Arizona was receiving approximately \$350,000 in annual federal funding to provide these services statewide.

In 1999, in an effort to encourage states to do more for transitioning youth, Congress passed The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (P.L. 106-169). This legislation:

- Doubled federal funding for the Independent Living Program.
- Requires states to use some portion of their funds for assistance and services for older youths who have left foster care but have not reached age 21.

- Allows states to use up to 30 percent of their Independent Living Program funds to pay for room and board for youths ages 18 to 21 who have left foster care.
- Allows states to extend Medicaid health insurance coverage to 18, 19 and 20 year olds who are in or who have left foster care after reaching age 18.

In 2002, Congress authorized specific funding to support the continuing education and training needs of foster youth. Federal funds are available so that states can give education and training vouchers (ETV) to youth who have aged out of foster care or are otherwise eligible for services under the State's foster care independence program.¹⁸ Eligible youth may receive a voucher for up to \$5,000 annually to be used for tuition, fees, books, room, board, transportation, child care, medical or dental care and other approved support.

In 2005, Arizona received almost \$2 million in federal Chafee Act funds to support independent living programs and services. In addition, \$680,358 in federal funds was received for the Education and Training Voucher program.

Children and youth enter the Arizona foster care system because of parental abuse, neglect or abandonment. Once this occurs, returning the child home or finding an alternative permanent placement is a primary goal. This includes reuniting the children with their family, or if that is not possible, arranging for an appropriate permanent alternative such as adoption or guardianship. However, permanency is not achieved for all children. Many youth remain in long-term foster care and do not leave the foster care system until they reach age 18.

DES Independent Living Policy

DES independent living policy is designed to help these youth prepare for and meet the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood.

Prior to age 18, but not later than age 16, DES policy requires that youth not on track to be returned home, adopted or placed with a permanent guardian must be provided with services and supports that will prepare them to eventually live independently. The purpose of these services and supports is to enhance the youth's emotional readiness for adult responsibilities, support success in education, prepare the youth for job and career, build skills for daily independent living, provide knowledge of their legal rights and responsibilities, and provide information and guidance on available community programs that can support this life transition.

At age 18, legally considered adults, youth have the option to leave the foster care system or to remain in care on a voluntary basis and receive services that complement their own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. Participating in these programs and remaining in the DES foster care system is contingent on the DES assessment of the youth's willingness to complete and comply with an independent living plan and agreement.¹⁹

Arizona Young Adult Program (AYAP)

In Maricopa and Pima Counties, DES has specific Arizona Young Adult Program (AYAP) units because these counties have a high number of transitioning youth. Case managers in these units specialize in providing services for youth transitioning from foster care.

In other areas of the state where the number of transitioning youth is smaller, DES case managers that work with transitioning youth are generalists who may also be responsible for Child Protective Services investigations, in-home services, foster care, adoption or guardianship cases.

Independent Living Subsidy Program (ILSP)

Transitioning youth may apply for and receive financial assistance through the Independent Living Subsidy Program.²⁰ To qualify for this program, youth must be at least 17 years of age, employed or full-time

students, and if between the ages of 17-18, have the approval of the juvenile court. This program offers youth in foster care the opportunity to live on their own in housing in the community. DES case managers are responsible for helping each youth develop a realistic budget which reflects a youth's earnings and expenses. Upon placement in the ILSP, DES case managers continue to assist and monitor each youth's activities and coordinate supportive services to help them make a smooth transition from a licensed foster care setting to living on their own. Youth receive a monthly stipend to defray

the costs of housing and living expenses. The maximum subsidy offered is \$558 per month.

Independent Living

In 2000, in response to the program options provided in The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, the Arizona legislature passed H.B. 2400 (Chapter 116, Laws of 2000). The major program provisions in this law include:

- (1) The **Voluntary Foster Care Program for Young Adults** that allows youth in foster care to voluntarily remain in the child welfare system until they reach age 21.²¹



(2) The **Transitional Independent Living Program** for youth who have left foster care after reaching the age of 16. This post-foster care support program is available statewide from community-based providers on contract to DES. Services offered include referral to financial aid programs, housing, health insurance enrollment, counseling, employment, and education assistance.

(3) **Young Adult Transitional Insurance (YATI) within Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System**

(AHCCCS) that provides health insurance coverage for youth who were in an out-of-home placement on their 18th birthday up to the age of 21.²²

The Arizona Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program

Established in 2003 with federal ETV funds, applications are processed through DES and DES gives checks directly to youth to support education and vocational training opportunities. ETV funds may be used for tuition, fees, books, room, board, transportation, child care, medical or dental care and other approved expenses.²³

Arizona Foster Care – Facts at a Glance

- 9,536 Arizona children were in foster care placement on September 30, 2004.
- 27% (2,590) of the children in foster care were between ages 13 and 17.
- 4% (341) of the children in foster care were over the age of 18.
- Over the past three years, approximately 1,200 youth ages 18 to 21 were eligible to remain in foster care on a voluntary basis.
- 12% (1,139) of youth in foster care (usually over the age of 16) had a case plan goal of independent living; another 5% (434) of youth in care had a goal of long term foster care.
- 50% of children in foster care live in Maricopa County, 29% live in Pima County and the remaining 21% live in other areas of Arizona.**
- In the past year, 467 youth left foster care after reaching age 18. On average, they had been in care longer than 4 years and experienced more than 8 foster care placements.
- During the year, cases were closed for 131 foster youth ages 13 or older because they had run away from foster care or because they had been transferred to another agency including the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections.
- Of foster youth ages 14 through 17, 73% had been referred to the court on a current or prior delinquency matter, and 57% had been the subject of one or more delinquency petitions.***
- 49% of foster youth ages 14 and older ultimately were placed on probation. And, at some point, 51% of these older foster youth had been detained.***
- Half of foster youth who were also involved in the juvenile justice system had experienced 11 or more foster care placements.***

**Source: Arizona Supreme Court, Foster Care Review Board. www.supreme.state.az.us/fcrb/stats.htm.

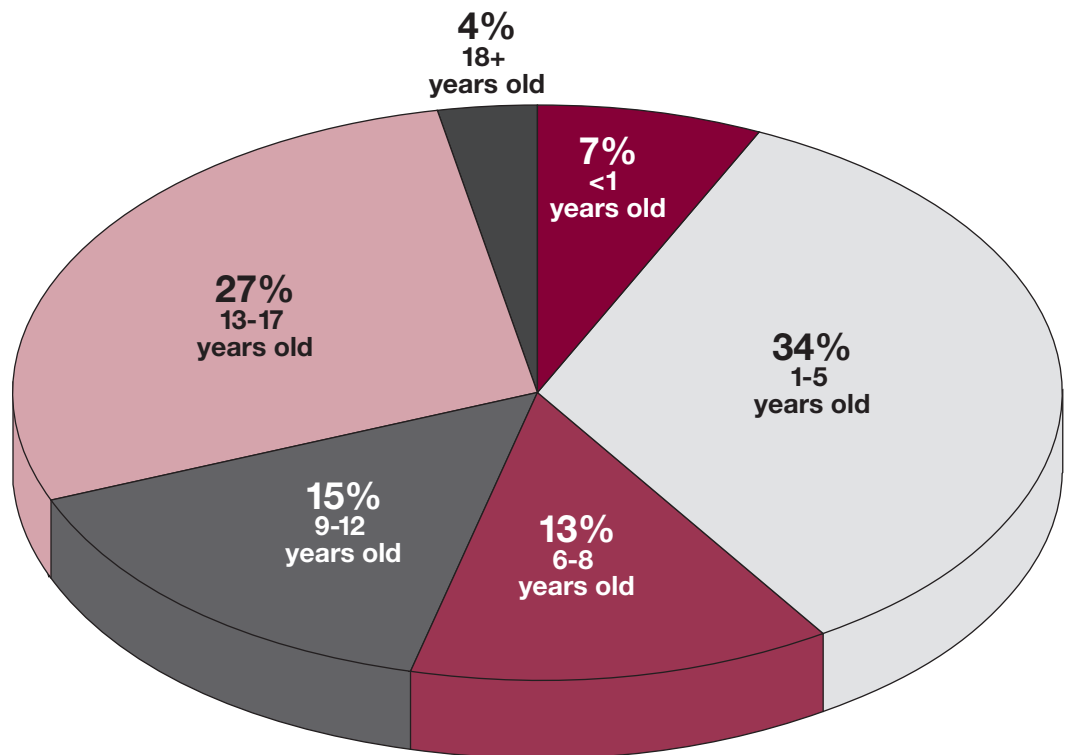
***Siegel, G and Halemba, G. "The Arizona Dual Jurisdiction Youth Study: Final Report." National Center for Juvenile Justice. December 2004.

Arizona Foster Youth—By the Numbers²⁴

Foster Youth

- As of March 31, 2005 there were 9,536 children in foster care.
- Older youth represented 31% of all youth in foster care. The proportion of all foster youth who are age 13 and older has been falling from a high of 41% in March 2000.
- Over the past four years, the number of older youth in foster care has shifted from a high of 2,918 youth in March 2000, to a low of 2,313 in September 2001 and rose to 2,931 in March 2005. During this same period, the total number of youth in foster care initially dropped from 7,054 in March 2000 to a low of 6,104 in March 2002 and rose to a high of 9,536 in March 2005.
- 11.9% of youth in foster care had a case plan goal of independent living; another 4.6% of youth in care had a goal of long term foster care. For these more than 1,500 children who are currently in foster care, their case plans do not include returning them home or placing them with an adoptive family or with a family assuming guardianship. For these youths, post-foster care connections will rely on developing non-legally binding supportive relationships with adults.
- 212 youth were living on their own through the Independent Living Subsidy Program.²⁵
- Last year, 467 foster youth left foster care after reaching the age of 18.²⁶

Chart 1. Ages of Youth in Foster Care, March 2005

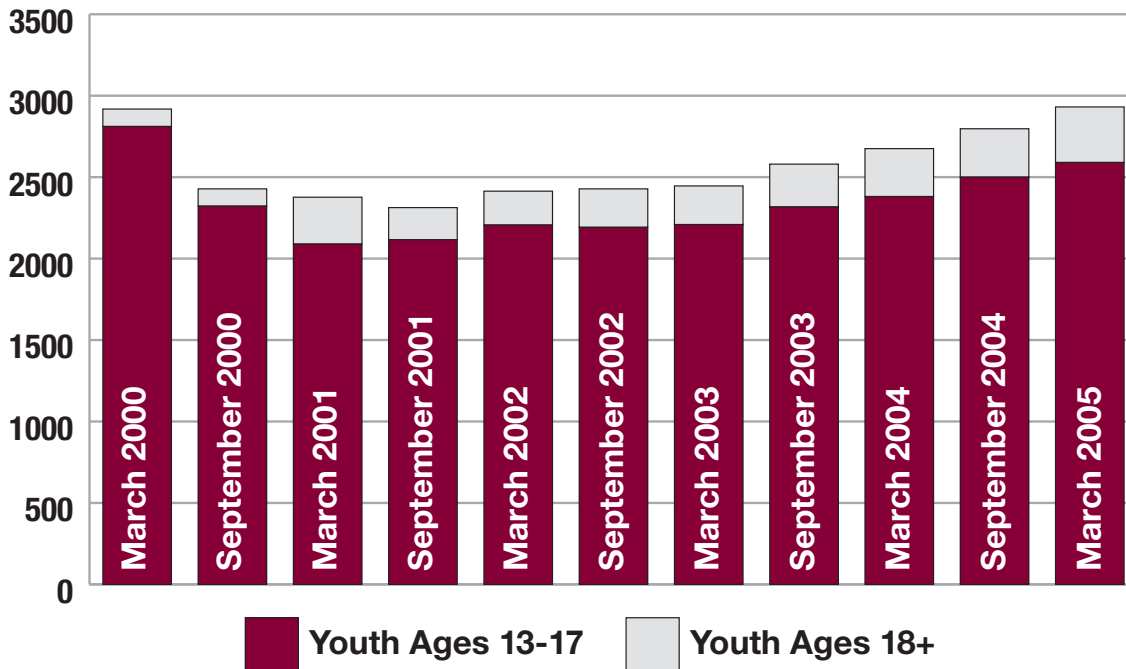


Number of Foster Care Placements: Older youth are likely to have a history of multiple foster care settings. Changing placements disrupt a youth’s relationships with peers, foster parents and other adults, often interferes with progress in school, and too frequently means changing health and mental health providers. Data on older youth also show a correlation between multiple placements and greater odds of involvement with the juvenile justice system.

- Nearly half of foster youth who are also under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system changed foster placements 11 or more times; the vast majority had 6 or more placements.²⁸

- Youth remaining in foster care to age 18 spent an average of over 4 years in foster care (48.6 months) and had more than 8 different placements.²⁷

Chart 2. Older Youth in Foster Care

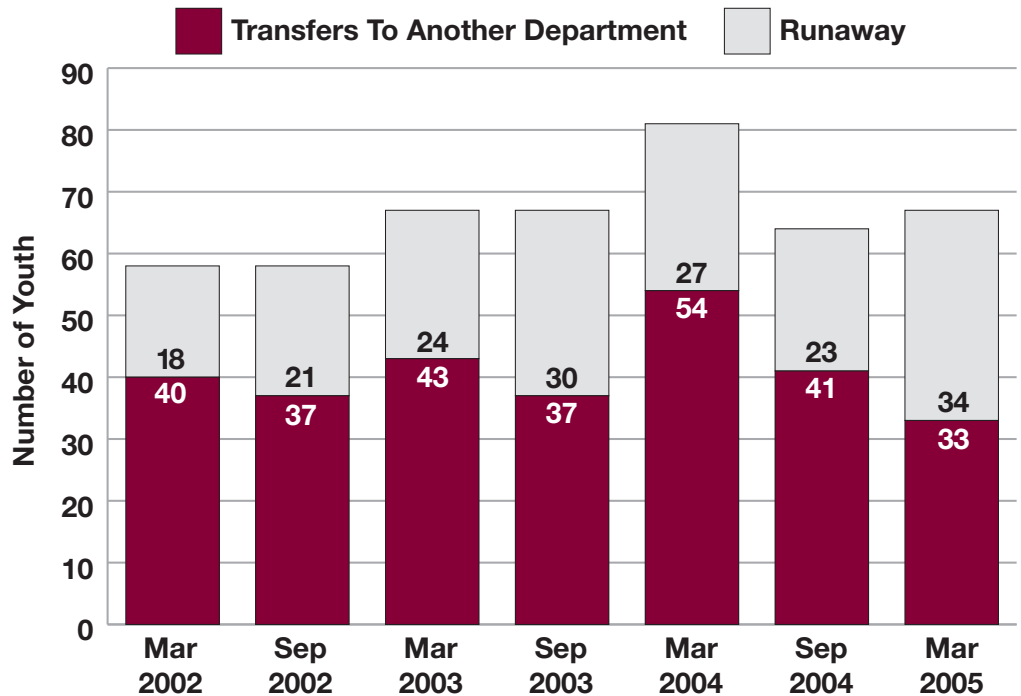


Source: DES Child Welfare Reporting Requirements Semi-Annual Reports. Data represent ages of foster children on last day of month shown.

Runaways and Transfers to Other Agencies: As shown in Chart 3, the number of youth that run away from foster care is increasing. When youth run away, DES may request that their dependency petition be dismissed and their case closed. When a foster child's case is closed for either runaway status or being transferred to another agency such as the Department of Juvenile Corrections, the child may be left with no parent or guardian to be concerned for their status or well-being. Runaway or missing youth are reported to police, but limited resources prevent agencies from aggressively seeking out runaway youth.

- As of March 31, 2005, 285 youth were identified as runaways from foster care.
- In this one year (April 2004 to March 2005), the cases of 58 foster youth were terminated because they were runaways.
- 74 youth ages 13 or older left foster care or had a dependency petition terminated as a result of being transferred to another agency such as the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections.²⁹

Chart 3. Youth Ages 13 and Older Whose Foster Care Case was Closed Because of Transfer to Another Agency or Runaway



Source: DES Child Welfare Reporting Requirements Semi-Annual Reports. This chart shows the number of case closings for older youth that were due to the youth being a runaway or because the youth was transferred to another agency.

Note on Case Scenarios:

The case scenarios presented in this report were derived from interviews with youth, CASA volunteers and community-based providers. DES staff were not interviewed. These case scenarios represent important perceptions from youth and the community as to how the case was handled.

Case Scenario: Duane

Duane had been in foster care for several years. As he was approaching his 18th birthday, he knew that he was eligible to stay in foster care and receive additional support and guidance. This was a difficult decision for Duane as he did not have great experiences in foster care and didn't really trust DES.

The day before his 18th birthday he set an appointment to meet with his CPS case manager to file the paperwork necessary to remain in care. He arrived five minutes late to the appointment and ran into the case manager in the parking lot of his office. The case manager told him that he was late for the appointment and too late to file the paperwork necessary to stay in care. As far as the state was concerned, he was 18 and on his own.

Duane ended up on the street—sleeping in parks, homeless shelters and occasionally on the couch of a friend. While on the street he was jumped, beaten, and robbed. To make matters worse, due to problems in an original international adoption, he had no identification papers—no picture identification and no original birth certificate.

After about a month of living on the street, Duane met a homeless youth caseworker who convinced him to visit their program's drop-in center. While the staff of the drop-in center tried to help him rebuild his life—including working cooperatively with DES to try to get him support designated for older foster youth—the process took several months and by then Duane had lost all faith in the system and eventually disappeared.

Last heard from, Duane had fathered a child, was selling drugs, and living back on the street.

Foster Youth Involved with the Juvenile Justice System

Children who are abused or neglected are more likely than other youth to exhibit behavioral problems and other behaviors that may result in referral to the juvenile justice system.³⁰

According to the 2004 National Center for Juvenile Justice study:³¹

- Nearly half of all Arizona dependent children in foster care ages eight or older were found to have had prior or

concurrent court involvement on a delinquency matter.

- Of foster youth ages 14 through 17: 73% were referred to the court on a delinquency matter; 57% were the subject of a delinquency petition; 49% were placed on probation; and 51% were held in a detention center.

Incarcerated Foster Youth: The most at risk foster youth are those who are dually adjudicated – some foster youth who are adjudicated both dependent and delinquent are also committed to the secure facilities of the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections (ADJC).³²

- In 2004, approximately 10% of youth in the state’s juvenile correctional facilities on any given day were foster children.

- 750 youth were released from ADJC in FY 2004 because they reached the age of 18— 93 (12%) of these youth were also foster youth (adjudicated dependent) at the time of their release.³³

Case Scenario: Tom

Tom had bounced between group homes and Arizona juvenile corrections facilities for several years.

While Tom did have a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer tracking his progress, planning for Tom’s future was apparently not well coordinated among his many caseworkers – CPS case manager, Independent Living Services coordinator, and juvenile corrections staff.

Realizing that Tom was approaching his 18th birthday, the CASA volunteer met with the CPS case manager to see what services could be put in place for his release back to the community. The case manager indicated that this was a difficult case as Tom continued to exhibit poor, sometimes disruptive, behaviors and Tom’s interest to help plan for his future was not very keen. Additionally, the private service provider contracted to help prepare foster youth to transition from care indicated that they could not gain access to Tom within the secure facility to provide Independent Living Skills Training or other assistance. However, this service provider thought that the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections provided independent living training. In Tom’s case, this turned out not to be true.

The climax of the confusion these multiple agencies faced in handling Tom’s case came on the day of his 18th birthday. The case plan called for him to be released from the juvenile corrections facility to a transitional living program. Tom’s CPS case manager was too busy that day and could not pick Tom up from the corrections facility. The CASA volunteer received a call from the juvenile corrections staff asking the CASA volunteer to pick up Tom. The CASA volunteer picked him up and transported him to the transitional living program, but the program would not accept Tom as they required a psychological evaluation which had not been completed.

After many hours on the phone, the CASA volunteer was told to take Tom to a homeless shelter for men. After several weeks, Tom was living on the street.

In 2002, little was known about the relevance of the support services provided to Arizona foster youth as they prepared for and transitioned to adulthood and living independently. Information was needed to determine if the services provided were appropriate, sufficient, timely, valuable to youth, and delivered in a manner that was helpful to them in making a successful transition.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with youth. The methodology for the focus groups and interviews as well as an extensive discussion of the youths' responses and significant quotes are included in Appendix A of this report.

Youth described the barriers as well as the factors that supported their success in the transition from foster care to living independently. In addition, participants provided their perspectives on the ways in which those in charge of the child welfare system could do better to help youth make a successful transition from foster child to independent adult. Key topics that emerged from these discussions included:

- The plan to transition from foster care to independence
- Support networks
- Information and resources
- Independent Living Skills Training
- Gradual transitions from foster care to independence
- Rights of youth in foster care
- School-work balance
- Budgeting and finance

A synopsis of the key issues and findings follows.

The Plan to Transition from Foster Care to Independence:

Continuing education and where to live were the major concerns as foster youth made their plans toward independence. Even with careful planning, youth found that life circumstances made changes in the plan necessary. Youth with resources (such as money saved) and a support network of friends, family, or a case manager were better able to shift plans and cope with unforeseen obstacles.

Support Networks

Foster youth count a supportive network as essential to a successful transition. Foster parents, extended family, teachers and case managers are among those foster youth say they need to help them make their way to independence. Youth without strong ties to others said they felt at a disadvantage and less able to cope with the challenges of transition.

Information and Resources

Youth need specific, reliable information regarding resources that may help them succeed on their own. Many expressed frustration that case managers were not often the source of the information they needed. Youth credited this situation to the frequent turnover of case management staff and the lack of a strong history between case managers and transitioning youth.

Youth reported that the most important resources needed during the transition include: a cosigner for renting an apartment, health insurance, and the financial assistance of the Independent Living Subsidy Program.

Independent Living Skills Training

Most youth participating in the focus groups and interviews had received independent living skills training. Fifteen percent of the youth reported that they did not take these classes; sometimes because they were not offered. Of those who took the classes, most thought that starting the

classes at age 16 was appropriate and that the classes build knowledge and skills over time. Youth suggested that practicing these living skills and more “hands-on” experiences, such as paying bills and making appointments for services, would be helpful.

Gradual Transitions from Foster Care to Independence

Youth in this study believed that a slower, more gradual, period of transition is best. These youth wanted more of a safety net—people and resources around them to help them through the period of adjustment most youth experience when they move away from parents or guardians. Peers and alumni from foster care are viewed as especially helpful and reliable sources of helpful information to manage the processes of transition.

Rights of Youth in Foster Care

Youth said they want and need more information about their rights and opportunities. Some reported they received good information from case managers and foster parents while others felt information was lacking. Youth suggested that a comprehensive handbook that outlines rights and responsibilities would be a reliable source of this important information.

School-Work Balance

It is usual for youth to work while attending school in order to have enough money to cover living expenses. But keeping up with both

Case Scenario: George

George had been in foster care for six years. In his senior year of high school he was doing everything his DES case manager asked him to do—living happily in a group home, doing well in school, employed, and looking forward to graduation.

Unfortunately, George would reach his 18th birthday before he completed high school. While many service providers assured George that he would be able to stay in foster care until graduation, his case manager announced that he needed to start looking for an apartment and get ready to live on his own. The decision to have George live independently was made by his caseworker and supported by the CPS supervisor, not by George.

While George, like many older foster youth, had taken Independent Living classes, he was immature and not prepared to live on his own.

George tried to put on a brave front, it was clear to some of the adults trying to help him that he was terrified. George, who had never had behavioral problems, began acting out in his group home to cover his fear and insecurities.

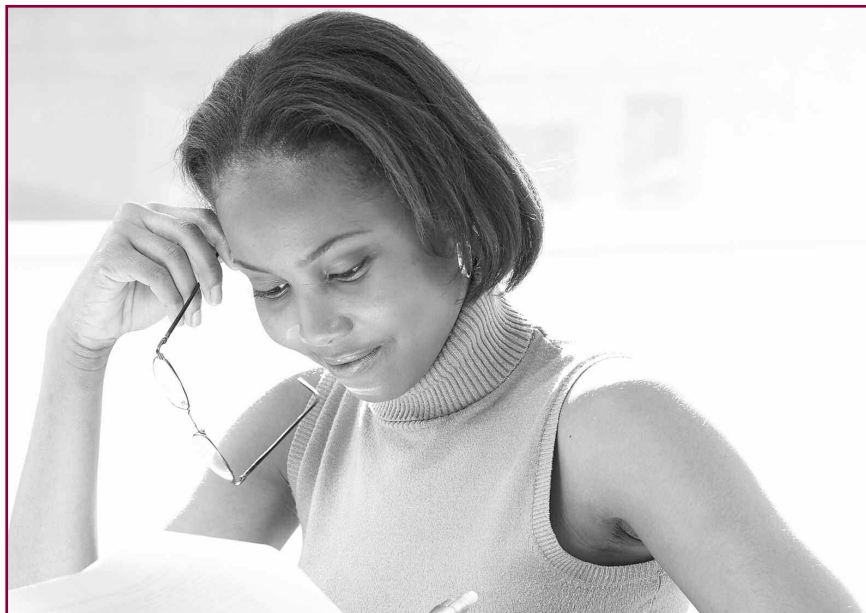
Before the determination to release George from foster care could be overturned, George dropped out of school, lost his job, and ran away.

work and school proves to be a challenge that many foster youth have trouble managing. Although aspirations are high to complete high school or seek an advanced degree, work can seriously compromise achieving educational goals.

Budgeting and Finance

Youth receiving the independent living subsidy reported that the subsidy amount was not enough for youth to maintain housing and pay for school expenses. Work to supplement the subsidy is essential as well as the need to carefully manage money. Youth reported that

budgeting, paying bills on time, and saving were critical skills that they needed to learn well and practice in order to make a successful transition.



Case Scenario: Annette

Annette had been in nine foster care placements in four years. While historically a pretty good student, she found herself in her senior year of high school running with a bad crowd, doing drugs, and not doing well in school.

But, Annette had three things going for her: She had a goal of going to college, she had a support network to get her back on track, and she had supplemental income to help make ends meet.

Annette always knew that going to college was one step toward improving her life. Through information provided by her CPS case manager and school counselors, she identified her schooling options, figured out the application process, and put together a package of grants, loans and expected income from working to cover tuition and living expenses.

Even having made the transition from foster care to living independently in college, she continued to struggle and made some poor choices—including not studying enough, working too many hours, running with a rough crowd. She still had some growing up to do. Fortunately for Annette, she had a network of people to provide emotional support, guidance and encouragement. These were individuals including her long-time case manager, a teacher, and former foster parents who cared about Annette, knew her goals and struggles, were interested in her success, and didn't give up on her even when she wasn't behaving or performing as well as she might have. They were her safety net.

While she was in college, Annette received a monthly housing allowance and assistance with college tuition. This provided her some needed financial stability, the opportunity to stay focused on school, and, ultimately, achieve her goal of earning a college degree.

Since the publication of *Transitions* in 2003, the following issues have come to the fore regarding policies and services for this population of youth.

Transitioning Youth from Foster Care:

- **Option of remaining in care after reaching age 18:** While current state law allows foster youth to voluntarily remain in the care of DES after reaching age 18 and receive additional support and guidance toward independence, the reality is that some youth are discouraged by their case managers from staying in foster care or they may be told they cannot stay in care. The law does provide that youth need “to accept personal responsibility for preparing for and making the transition to adulthood,”³⁴ however, case work practice and decision-making regarding the criteria for which youth may remain in care is not consistent as applied by DES staff.
- **Too many foster care placements:** Many Arizona youth are shuffled from placement to placement. On average older foster youth exiting care experienced 8.4 different placements over the course of their years in foster care. More than half the youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have experienced more

than 11 placements prior to reaching the age of 18. Most of these placements are in group care settings. An over-burdened and under-resourced system is not accommodating the needs of a growing number of youth that will “age-out” of care.

Youth under the Jurisdiction of Both the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

Dually adjudicated youth (both dependent and delinquent) may be the least likely to receive appropriate services to help them make a successful transition. Policy and consistent application of best practices in addressing the needs of this population are lacking.

- **Lack of continuity and consistency in case management:** Currently, youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have many people involved in their lives, but there are no clearly delineated communication protocols or processes for coordinated case planning and case management. For youth committed to the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections (ADJC), DES case managers do not meet regularly with incarcerated youth as required for other children in foster care. Joint treatment and services planning is not well coordinated between the staffs of the two agencies, and planning for transition is too



often delayed until the youth may be ready to leave an ADJC facility. Yet, DES remains legally responsible for these youth, and unless there is a Court Appointed Special Advocate involved, no other person is available to advocate for the youth's needs.

- **Dismissing dependency petitions harm youth:** DES has acknowledged that sometimes they requested and were granted dismissal of dependency petitions by the juvenile court for youth who were committed to the ADJC. Such practice harms a youth in several ways. The court has already determined that the youth's parent is unwilling or incapable of protecting the youth from abuse or neglect. If DES is no longer involved in the case, there is no "parent" (the role DES has in such a circumstance) to advocate for the needs of the youth. Furthermore, when a dependency petition is dismissed, the youth may not be eligible for the program supports and services

other foster youth can receive as they transition from foster care. In February 2005, DES sent an e-mail directive to staff not to close cases of dependent youth who are detained or incarcerated, but formal policy has not yet been issued.

- **No access to independent living services:** Dually adjudicated youth placed in detention or in ADJC facilities are not participating in, nor receiving, DES-sponsored independent living skills training and supports as required and available for other foster youth. Although ADJC may have some skills training for youth, this training does not address the specific and comprehensive needs of dependent foster youth who will not return to a family network once they are released from ADJC custody. Community-based providers under contract with DES for Independent Living Skills Training and Services have reported an inability to gain access to youth in secure juvenile corrections facilities.

2004-2005 Progress

Additional attention and progress has been made to address the problems and needs of youth transitioning from foster care since the publication *Transitions* in 2003.

- The 2003 Governor's Commission on Child Protective Services Reform adopted the recommendations of Children's Action Alliance's 2003 *Transitions* report and the Governor's Action Plan includes two action steps specifically related to transitioning youth.

1. Create Mentoring Program for Foster Youth Transitioning into Adulthood. *Today, a peer mentoring program in Tucson is gaining strength and seeks to mentor more than the handful of youth on its current caseload.*

2. Organize a State Foster Youth Advisory Board. *DES had a long-standing Youth Advisory Board, but this group was reconstituted in 2004 and now meets twice a year with the Governor and Executive Staff of DES.*

- Arizona's Administrative Office of the Courts contracted with the National Center on Juvenile Justice to conduct a study of youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The Study released in December 2004 (and cited within this report) provides recommendations for improving outcomes for dually involved youth.

- Through the Governor's CPS Reform efforts, a Dually-Involved Work Group was established to develop interagency protocols to ensure case coordination for youth who are dually-adjudicated (involved with more than one government agency - CPS, ADJC, juvenile probation and/or behavioral health services). This group continues to meet and is working on an Interagency Practice Protocol framework to be signed by the involved agencies. The protocol would lay the foundation for more specific protocols to be developed between



the state agencies and the county juvenile probation departments.

- In January 2005, DES initiated a pilot program in two case management units (one in Phoenix and one in Tucson) that permits a 60 day delay in case closure for youth who leave foster care after age 18. The pilot allows youth who may have had unrealistic goals or plans to change their minds about living on their own and return “home” to foster care on a voluntary basis for additional support. Five months into this pilot, it has been reported that one youth has asked to re-enter care.³⁵
- In February 2005, DES provided direction to staff not to close dependency cases when dependent youth in DES care, custody and control are either detained or incarcerated. In concert with the Dually-Involved Workgroup activities, it is expected that DES policy formalizing this directive will be issued by fall 2005.
- The Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program is now training their volunteers to better assist adolescents including those transitioning from foster care. The Maricopa County CASA program has also developed a resource manual for CASA volunteers to use while working with older youth.
- In 2004, each state university identified specific liaisons to work with foster youth in the application and scholarship processes.
- The Governor’s Interagency and Community Council on Homelessness has reviewed the recommendations from the 2003 *Transitions* report and is working to develop social service and housing supports to prevent homelessness of youth transitioning from care.

Recommendations

To provide opportunities and prevent poor outcomes, we recommend the following actions.

1. **Encourage older youth to remain in care until they have the capabilities and resources to successfully live on their own.** DES case management staff should consistently support youth through their transition from foster care. All youth should be provided with comprehensive information to help them arrive at an informed decision to remain in the foster care system beyond age 18 or to exit care. Policies and practices should encourage youth to either participate in the independent living subsidy program or remain in a foster care placement until they have the capabilities and resources to successfully live on their own. All youth in transition or exiting care should have a realistic plan that supports housing, health care, education and/or employment opportunities and mentoring connections.
2. **Provide an independent process for appeal when DES denies the opportunity for youth to remain in care beyond age 18.** If DES determines that a youth may not remain in care beyond age 18 because of noncompliance with the case plan, a youth should be able to appeal this decision to the Office of Administrative Hearings as DES is essentially denying a benefit to a client. DES should develop policies

and rules to implement this independent appeals process.

3. **Change policy to allow older foster youth to return on a “voluntary” status once they have left foster care.** For the most part, once a foster youth has left the foster care system after age 18, there is no opportunity for them to return “home,” to foster care revise their plan for independence, and begin again. DES did initiate a pilot in January 2005 to delay closure of cases for 60 days to allow youth who leave foster care after age 18 to re-enter care if they change their minds. This is a good first step. However, DES policy should enable any youth who has exited care between the ages of 18 to 21 to return under a “voluntary” status, and allow them to benefit fully from federal and state program supports.
4. **Increase the Independent Living Subsidy rate and identify new resources to connect transitioning foster youth with safe and affordable housing.** The Independent Living Subsidy rate for eligible youth is currently no more than \$558 per month. These funds help to defray the costs of housing, food, utilities, transportation and other living expenses. In fiscal year 2005, Arizona’s fair market rate for a one bedroom apartment was \$636 per month, an increase of 32% since 1999.³⁶ The low Independent Living Subsidy rate—not adjusted since the late 1980s — cripples a

youth's ability to secure safe and stable housing, stunts opportunities for higher education, and leaves these youth economically vulnerable. In 2006, the Governor should request and the legislature should fund an increase in this subsidy rate.

Additionally, the Governor's Interagency and Community Council on Homelessness should vigorously continue to involve state agencies, cities and the private sector to develop additional and more affordable housing options for transitioning youth. Mechanisms (such as co-signers and legal assistance) that help youth obtain safe and affordable housing should also be available.

5. Implement protocols and practices that continue inter-agency coordination and services to dually adjudicated youth. In February 2005, DES provided direction to staff not to close dependency cases when dependent youth in DES' care, custody and control are either detained or incarcerated. This policy directive is a great step and work continues to adopt inter-agency protocols to support dually involved youth throughout the state. These new protocols should assure coordination between DES, the courts and ADJC, provide that dependency petitions are not dropped for adjudicated dependent youth caught up in the juvenile justice system, and require that DES case managers stay fully

involved with the youth through visitation and case planning. This will help to assure that eligible youth have access to health insurance (AHCCCS/Young Adult Transitional Insurance - YATI), independent living subsidy, contracted community services and other available supportive services.

6. Expand the mentoring program to assure all youth in the process of transitioning from foster care have an adult mentor. Research tells us that most 18-year olds, regardless of economic or educational status, are not fully capable of assuming adult responsibilities. Whether it is the foster youth alumni, foster parent, group home leader, case manager, social service provider, community advisor, teacher or a relative, youth transitioning from foster care need a strong connection to an adult they can trust to provide them with support and information. While some adults now serve this role, for too many youth, the connection has been lost or was never fully established. DES should shore up the needed connections and mentoring resources for youth with help from community-based agencies, faith-based institutions, civic organizations, the business community and foster youth alumni. Ideally this connection would be for several years, but should be in place not less than one year before and one year after leaving foster care.

7. Provide sufficient financial support to permit foster youth to continue with post-secondary education or other professional or trade school.

Congress has provided some federal funding to the states through the Educational and Training Voucher program to support the continuing post-secondary education and vocational training needs of foster youth. This funding will not keep pace with the need. An increasing number of youth will be eligible for the voucher program. The rising costs for tuition and other costs associated with living and attending school will also increase. State agencies, the state's post secondary education institutions and philanthropic organizations need to work better together to identify financial aid sources that will augment available federal funding so that all foster youth who want to attain an advanced education may do so. These funds should also go directly to the educational institutions as other scholarship program funds do, rather than directly to the youth as is the current DES practice.

8. Provide at least one CPS Independent Living Specialist in each CPS district and sufficient case management staff to support youth's needs. In rural CPS Districts, there are not sufficient cases to have specialized Young Adult Program units, and case managers who are generalists lack

the expertise in independent living issues. Each DES Child Protective Services district should have at least one CPS Program Specialist who has training and expertise regarding independent living issues and the state and local services available. These Specialists should be available to support and assist case managers, foster care providers and mentors in their work with youth.

CPS caseloads should be small enough to give case managers the time they require to provide essential services for transitioning youth. This means caseloads should be in line with national Child Welfare League of America Standards (CWLA) standards. (The standards call for caseloads of fifteen youth in foster care to each case manager.) Currently foster care caseloads are over this recommended standard. Sufficient staffing is required to assure all youth in foster care receive the attention and supports they need.

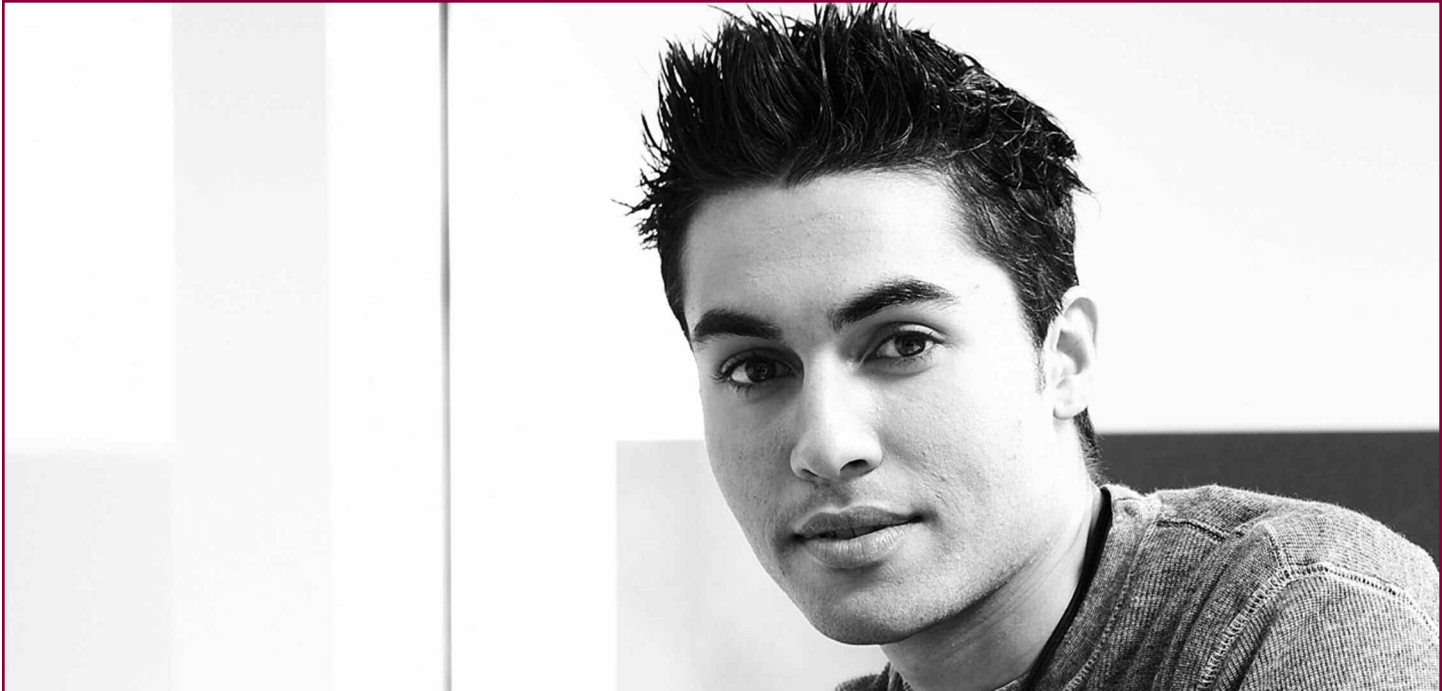
9. Increase the quantity, quality and appropriateness of foster care placements. DES licensing rules and contracts for foster homes and group care agencies should incorporate provisions to allow youth to prepare for eventual self-sufficiency. DES should also recruit more foster homes that want to provide care for adolescents and are willing to participate in the specialized training needed to meet the developmental needs of

this population. A high quality foster care system would prevent adolescents from leaving transitional care too soon or from running away. The Federal John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act³⁷ requires the state to use a portion of its federal funds to provide training to foster parents, provider staff, law enforcement and others on issues confronting adolescents preparing for independent living. We recommend the state increase these training opportunities to enhance the quality of supports available to adolescents in care and those transitioning out.

- 10. Track outcomes of transitioning youth**—At present, there is little data about Arizona youth who transition from foster care or the outcomes of programs and services provided to these youth. Almost nothing is known about how these youth fare once they leave foster care. What are the circumstances that lead to running away from foster care and what happens to these youth? What are the outcomes for youth who reach age 18 and decide not to stay in the state's care? When foster youth are transferred to another agency from DES' care, where do they go, what services do they receive, and what is the case outcome? How many former foster youth are in correctional facilities? DES and other involved state agencies must answer these questions so that we may wisely

use resources to care for transitioning youth and to identify the gaps that impeded their successful transition.

Changing the system to better support youth transitioning from foster care to independence is the responsibility of all agencies and organizations that come in contact with these young people. In every community, the system of human services that cares for our most vulnerable citizens should also be aware of the needs of this population as they are leaving the state system of care.



**Appendix A:
2002 Focus Group and Interview Findings: Youth Speak for Themselves**



In 2002, Children's Action Alliance (CAA) went directly to foster youth and those who had recently left the foster care system to ask them about their transition experiences and the challenges they faced. The Casey Family Program, Tucson Division, joined with CAA to convene focus groups and conduct interviews with young adults across Arizona. The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) and community based providers assisted in identifying youth and facilitating their involvement in the focus groups and interviews. These discussions offered young people the opportunity to describe the challenges they face, the programs and supports they found most beneficial while in foster care and after leaving the foster care system and the resources they continue to need as individuals reaching for life's goals and promises.

Approach and Methodology

CAA conducted focus groups and interviews with 39 youth from across Arizona.

Youth were identified to participate in the focus groups through several means. The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) solicited names from case managers. Social service agencies, including Casey Family Programs and Florence Crittenton Services, also identified potential project participants. To participate, youth had to be over age 16 and either preparing for or have completed the transition from foster care. Youth

were contacted by CAA³⁸ and asked to participate in either a focus group or telephone interview.

Characteristics: Youth participating in these discussions came from various communities and placement settings and represented varied experiences within the foster care system.³⁹ The demographic data below about these youth are reported in both percentages as well as the number of survey respondents.

- **Location:** Youth from the Arizona communities of Chandler, Elfrida, Flagstaff, Glendale, Mesa, Page, Phoenix, Prescott Valley, Sierra Vista, Tucson, and Yuma participated in the focus groups and interviews.
- **Age:** 69% (24) of participants were between ages 16 and 19 and another 14% (5) were ages 20 or 21.
- **Foster Care Experience:** 24% (8) of participants were in the foster care system for fewer than five years, 38% (13) were in foster care between five and 10 years, and 38% (13) were in foster care for 11 or more years. 39% (14) of participants had been in four or fewer foster care settings while 26% (9) experienced between five and 10 settings.
- **Education Level:** 26% (9) of participants had not graduated from High School, 14% (5) were working on their GED, and 37% (13) were enrolled in

college or employment/training classes.

- **Employment:** 60% (21) of participants were employed. Of those not employed, 80% (11) expressed a desire to be employed.
- **Health Insurance:** 12% (4) of participants did not have health insurance coverage, 65% (23) of participants were provided health insurance coverage through a public program such as AHCCCS or CMDP,⁴⁰ and 15% (5) received health insurance coverage through their employer.
- **Homelessness:** Of the youth participants already living on their own, 28% (5) indicated that they had at some time experienced “living on the street.”
- **Independent Living Skills:** 15% (5) of participants reported that they did not take Independent Living Skills classes. Of those who did not take these classes, 60% (3) reported that the classes were not offered to them.

Questions and Issues: In the focus groups and interviews, CAA asked a variety of questions and discussed a broad range of issues associated with transitioning from foster care to independence. We asked youth participants to describe:

- The components of their plan that helped them transition from foster care to being on their own. Commonly referred to as a “transition plan,” elements might

include a plan for housing, transportation, ways to get health care needs addressed, education, and employment.

- Changes they made to their transition plan and the reasons that changes in their plans were necessary.
- Assistance they received in setting and altering their transition plan.
- The hardest and easiest aspects of making the transition from foster care to independence.
- Recommendations for other youth transitioning from foster care to independence.
- Recommendations to improve the state foster care system.

The Plan to Transition From Foster Care to Independence

Youth participants were asked to describe the independent living case plans for transitioning from foster care to living on their own. Almost exclusively, youth discussed two facets of their plan: education and living situations. Each youth discussed completing or obtaining additional education or training as part of their plan. Youth saw this as important to securing a job that could support them in the short term as well as an essential part of their long-term stability.

“My plan right now is to finish high school and go on to college. I think that is really important. Ultimately, I want to be a social worker and I know you need college for that.” (Phoenix)

In addition, participants generally talked about securing stable living arrangements as part of their transition plan. For some this meant securing an apartment, living in a college dorm or living with a family member. For others it meant continuing to live with a foster family.

“I knew I wanted to be living by myself in an apartment. My case manager said I should look for a roommate. But, I didn’t want to live with a stranger. So, I just kept to my plan. I got an apartment. That worked for a while but now I’m living with my aunt.” (Phoenix)

For these youth the question was not so much “if” they had a plan, but how realistic it was and if they had the resources to help them adapt to needed changes in the plan. For most of the discussion participants, events did not develop exactly according their plan. Changes were needed as they confronted new obstacles or problems.

A major area of divergence for foster youth who remained stable, and those who were not, was their ability to modify their plan. Those who had the personal resources or a support network of case managers, friends or family members were better able to adjust their plan as their life shifted and changed.

“Everything that I thought I was going to do didn't happen. I was planning on moving out on my 18th birthday. That did not happen. I was planning on getting an apartment by myself, and I had to get a roommate. I kept

getting fired or quitting my job. I thought it was going to be a lot easier than it was. It turned out to be really hard. I couldn't do this by myself.” (Phoenix)

Support Networks

Youth transitioning from foster care to independence talked extensively about the importance of support networks to help them prepare for and make the transition from foster care system to independent living. It was clear to just about all of them that they needed the help of key individuals—case managers, friends, family members—to make a successful transition and continue to face the issues that would confront them as adults.

“I was doing OK. I was living in my own apartment. But, I still had trouble figuring things out. And you know you can only get someone (a case manager) on the phone before 5 p.m. If it is after that, too bad. Sometimes you just need somebody to ask some questions (of).” (Tucson)

The primary support that youth had or wanted was from their case manager or foster family. For those foster youth with strong connections to these important individuals, the support fostered their transition to independence. Those that had weaker ties to these important individuals, felt they lacked the support network they needed to be successful. Indeed, those with weaker ties to case managers or family members believed that this greatly disadvantaged them as they set out to be independent.

With a Support Network: Support networks provided these youth with several kinds of assistance. Primarily, support networks were a way for youth to develop, fine tune, and enact their transition plan. Youth relied on support networks to help develop the plan and stay focused on the desired outcome:

“I really relied on my Independent Living teacher. We really connected.... She and I talked about my plans and she was always asking how they’re going. We made benchmarks and when I would reach one, she’d do something nice for me. Like this one time, she got me a coffeepot for my apartment, and I hadn’t even moved in yet. It really meant a lot to me.” (Flagstaff)

“My foster mom helped me put together my plan. We just talked about the kinds of things I want to do in life. Like, I want to be a doctor. She had me talk to a friend of hers who is a doctor and he told me what it was going to take...what it was going to be like. That was really helpful. It helped me to focus on my goal.” (Tucson)

“Right away my case manager started talking about Independent Living classes. At first I said, ‘I don’t need those classes.’ But he kept encouraging me to take them. And he was right. I learned a lot.” (Yuma)

In addition, these supportive individuals were great sources of information for youth transitioning from the foster care. For example, youth relied on them for information about their foster care arrangements,

about moving towards independence, about programs that are available to them, various program rules, and other resources:

“I got the feeling like she (the case manager) really cared about my welfare.... We would talk about stuff and she would bring in different points of view and suggest that I think about things differently. She was a great source of information on what the system could offer me and what programs were available. I trusted her advice.” (Phoenix)

“My case manager is really good. He is not burned out. He only has a few cases on his load because he is going to retire so he really has time to help me. So, I ask him all kinds of stuff and he gives me direction. Whenever I have a problem he can tell me who to call to get it taken care of.” (Phoenix)

Participants relied on their support networks to help them accomplish more “everyday” tasks—such as finding out about cars, getting information on insurance, or helping in small emergencies. For example, one youth described the time he called on his foster parent to help him when his car broke down:

“I was able to turn to my case manager for a lot of things and also my foster family. I asked them for advice on personal stuff, help figuring things out. Just last week my foster mom gave me a lift to the shop where I was having my car worked on. If I didn’t get that ride, I’m not sure how I would have gotten that car in.” (Phoenix)

Information and Resources

Without a Support Network: Youth who did not have a reliable support network described having to face life situations on their own. Some articulated feeling lonely, isolated, and unable to get important information as they faced this significant transition:

“I wish I had had some mentors or something. There are a lot of times that I need to talk to someone and there is really no one around. I don’t have anyone. I guess I just wish I had some kind of support network. I don’t think I can do this all alone.”(Phoenix)

“You know other kids could probably ask their parents about stuff. But, hello, I don’t have parents I can ask, I don’t have anybody. So I guess I’m just out of luck.” (Phoenix)

“I didn’t really have anyone to talk to when I really needed it. I made a huge number of mistakes... things that could have been avoided, I’m sure. But, I just had to do it all alone and make all those mistakes.” (Phoenix)

“I really wanted to go to college, but it was expensive. So, I was only taking a class at a time. Finally, someone at school told me about these scholarships that I might be able to get. When my case manager finally called me back I told him about these and he said he knew all about them. Why he never mentioned them to me when he knew I wanted to go to school, I don’t know. He said he would send me an application, but I never got anything.” (Yuma)

Youth transitioning from foster care to living independently talked about the importance of having information and access to supportive resources. They described being interested in information on the variety of programs or opportunities available to them—both today and farther into the future. Youth noted that they needed this information in several forms—verbally from a trusted source as well as via the telephone, written materials or the internet. Several suggested that a resource guide would have been helpful.

“There needs to be a list or book or something. Something that tells you about all the rules, all the programs, all the benefits and what you have to do to get them. Sometimes you don’t know what is out there and available to you.” (Phoenix)

“I don’t know how to get all that stuff (housing, education assistance, health care). CPS should broadcast what it is that we can receive and what it is we have to do to get these benefit type things. A lot of us don’t know this. It is not being thrown in our face.” (Phoenix)

Many lamented that their case manager was not a good source of information. Some believed that their case manager did not know their individual situation or the system well enough to help them obtain the information they needed. Others believed that their case manager was intentionally withholding pertinent information:

“I didn’t like that (lack of information) about CPS. They throw you off. They don’t give you the information you need. They don’t give you a straight answer. You know...keep you in the dark...in the dark about your case or what is happening in the future.” (Phoenix)

“She (the case manager) didn’t know me real well. I was just another case. She probably had hundreds of kids like me. She was basically just getting by.... I don’t think she ever once asked me what I wanted to do with my life. Like, I wanted to be a nurse. You know, go to nursing school....well, it is too late now” (Tucson)

Others suggested that a place—a “one-stop”—of information for youth in the foster care system would also be helpful. These youth noted that they needed a place where they could verify what the case manager had told them as well as get additional information.

“You know there is all this stuff and programs out there, but I didn’t know it. And the agencies don’t tell you what might be available somewhere else. There needs to be a place that has all the information. ‘Cause you don’t know what you don’t know.” (Tucson)

In particular, these young people cited three specific areas of need for more information and assistance:

1. Housing Co-signer: The need for youth to have a cosigner to lease an apartment was an issue that took many youth by surprise and hindered their plans to secure housing. Youth

reported that if they did not have a cosigner, many housing complexes would either not rent to them or ask them to pay a large security deposit. As most did not have substantial savings or someone in their support network whom they could call on to be a co-signer, many were unable to implement their plan of getting an apartment.

“I had been saving up for an apartment. I knew that I was going to have to come up with a security deposit, and all. Well, I went out looking and no one would rent to me because I wasn’t 18 and I had no credit history. So finally I found a place that would rent to me but they charged me a boatload of money.... everything that I had saved up...my emergency money. Well, that was a big mistake, because you know something always happens. And, I didn’t have any money saved up. So something happens (an emergency) and I’m already not paying bills and getting behind. I had only been there like a month.” (Phoenix)

2. Health Insurance: Most youth knew that they had some kind of insurance while in the foster care system. Of those participating in Young Adult Program, most knew that they continued to have health insurance through the state AHCCCS program. For youth who were no longer linked to the child welfare system, there was some confusion over what benefits they might be eligible for.

“In terms of health, I really didn’t know anything. I still don’t. I know that I get health insurance because I’m in YAP. But does that run out when I’m 21? I have no idea.” (Phoenix)

3. Continuation of Independent

Living Subsidy: Most of the youth who participated in this project knew that they might be eligible to continue to receive an Independent Living Subsidy past their 18th birthday if they met certain requirements. However, there was often confusion over what the requirements are and how to make sure they remain in the program. In some cases youth did not even know this option was available to them.

“I know I am about to be cut off in January. But this girl here (another focus group participant) told me that she is getting some kind of subsidy and she is 19. How is that? How can I get that? I got to ask my case manager about this.” (Phoenix)

Independent Living Skills Training

Participants were specifically asked to talk about the kinds of skills they learned as part of Independent Living Skills Training. First, it is important to note that not all youth participate in Independent Living Skills Training. Some are eligible to take an Independent Living Skills test. If they pass, they are not required to take Independent Living classes.

Interestingly, several participants reported that they were not offered the opportunity to participate in Independent Living classes.

Generally, youth who participated in Independent Living Skills Training gave it mixed reviews in terms of usefulness. Many felt they knew much of the information that was covered in the classes; that the classes were more like “refresher” courses. Some noted that the courses covered information that they knew, but did not cover information that was critical to their transition:

“I don’t remember them talking about credit. Yes, they talked about credit cards and debt and stuff, but not like building up a credit history. I didn’t know what that was about or how important it was. I was out there in the world ignorant.” (Page)

“I think I could have used more in-depth classes. The classes need to be more realistic. They think we can’t handle realistic. It is all like play... using play money and stuff. But we have to be realistic. We have no choice, right? Kids who are about to leave need to be told the real deal.” (Flagstaff)

Participants also talked about the ages that they began Independent Living Skills Training. Most believed that starting when a youth is 16 is about the correct age. These participants stated that starting to teach these skills any earlier would not have been productive as the lessons would have been lost on

youth who are not yet ready to think about being on their own. Others, however, suggested that Independent Living Skills Training should be started earlier. These participants noted that they did not think that participating in a “skill building” class at a young age was the answer, but exposing youth to independent living ideas and exercises at younger ages would help prepare them to take Independent Living classes seriously. Ultimately, they recommend that these skills be taught over a longer period of time.

Finally, some youth called for a greater ability to practice the skills that were covered in the Independent Living Skills Training. They believe that without time to practice the skills in real-life settings, the classes were somewhat meaningless. This was particularly an issue for youth living in group homes who reported that they were not able to make phone calls without prior permission from case managers and therapists, which would have allowed them to practice skills like obtaining information on social service programs, housing options or bank accounts. Youth who did have “hands-on” experiences generally felt better able to handle these tasks once they lived independently. As youth said:

“My foster family had me do all kinds of things. I was really into horses. But, it is expensive to ride. So, they said if I wanted to ride I had to work and save the money to pay. And, I had to get certain grades in school. This was a big motivator

for me. It really helped me to learn to be organized and independent and good with money.” (Tucson)

“I took those (Independent Living Skills Training) classes. They were OK. It was some stuff I know and some stuff I didn’t. I was living in a group home. You know they did every thing for us. I never had to make an appointment or pay a bill. Honestly, the first time I ever saw an electric bill was after I moved out. I never thought about any of this until I was already about and trying to do it all on my own. It was a big wake up call” (Phoenix)

Gradual Transition from Foster Care to Independence

Several youth offered the observation that they wished that the transition from foster care to living on their own had been more gradual. These youth noted that in some ways they felt ready to make the transition, but in other ways they did not:

“I missed a lot of High School during that time. There was no one there to tell you to get up and go to school. I would sleep through my alarm half the time. When I was in the system, I had no problem getting up and getting to school. But when I was on my own, it was a different story.” (Phoenix)

For these youth, a slower transition would have enabled them to build skills and gradually learn what it meant to live independently without having to bear all the risks of being independent. Many also noted that they felt that they had little in

terms of a support network to fall back on. These youth believe that without a gradual transition they were more likely to experience a minor emergency as a major setback:

“I wish they (DES) could figure out a way to give you a little freedom at a time. Instead of one day saying, ‘You’re on your own, good-bye.’ When you are 18 you are still a teen and immature at times. It is really a lot to deal with being all alone.”
(Phoenix)

“I wish there had been some assistance in terms of when I moved into my own apartment. There should be like transitional housing or something. I wasn’t fully ready to be on my own. It would have been good to be out of the group home but still under their watch and guidance. I still needed people to check in with but I really didn’t have anyone. This would have been helpful for about a year. You don’t really understand what it is going to be like until the bills start coming in. That is life. But I didn’t have anyone to help me... to fall back on. I just remember I cried all the time.”
(Phoenix)

Peer Networks

As shown in these results, youth transitioning from foster care to being independent commented frequently on support networks. Some youth reported that it would be helpful to build a support network that involved other transitioning youth. This finding took two forms. First, some youth talked about the importance of getting a chance to

interact with other youth in the foster care system. They believed that they could benefit from getting to know others who are going through the same life issues. Second, some youth indicated that they would have found it beneficial to hear about the transition from foster care to living independently from young adults who have made the transition. They believed that this would be another, valuable source of information and might have influenced their thinking in ways that conversations with adults did not.

“I think it would have helped to hear from older youth as to what it was going to look like. It might have helped. They might have been able to tell me what was going on instead of always relying on my case manager. I couldn’t trust her. In some ways kids will listen to other kids more than adults. Kids are going through the same things and can relate to the experiences.”
(Phoenix)

“Having some people my own age that I could talk to about being in foster care really helped. These people were like me, going through the same things I was. I learned a lot from them.” (Tucson)

Rights of Youth in Foster Care

Several participants indicated that they wished they had known their rights and opportunities available to them as foster children. They believed that having this information would have enabled them to better make necessary choices before and during the

transition. Some noted that their case managers or case managers or foster families told them about some of their rights and program opportunities. Others said that they received little or no correct information from these sources. These participants suggested that having a booklet that outlines their rights and where to get more information and having discussions about rights and responsibilities would have been very helpful:

“There are a lot of kids out there that don’t know their rights, until it is too late. There should be a class or book or something that kids could use to learn about their rights. That way they can stick up for themselves and know what is out there for them.” (Phoenix)

“We need to know our rights. They have this piece of paper that says our rights. But that ain’t all there is to know. I need to know about my options.” (Phoenix)

School-Work Balance

Several youth talked about balancing high school and work responsibilities. Most said that they needed to work because they needed money for personal items, basic needs and housing costs. Others said that they liked working because it was more pleasant and satisfying than their home environment.

A handful of participants reported having no trouble balancing school and work obligations. However, many more described the

difficulty of balancing these two obligations. For many of these youth, working extensive hours negatively impacted their school work.

“I feel like I kind of messed up part of this year because I was working a lot and I let some of my grades slip. I would be in school all day and then work until 10:30 p.m. and then try to do homework until about 12:30. Then get up early and start again. I was working 30 hours a week and it was hard to keep it all organized. I finally realized that I made a bit of a mistake.” (Yuma)

“I was working 40 hours a week at the Wal-Mart as a cashier and going to High School full time. I wanted to finish High School. It was important to me. But, I would be so tired out and wouldn’t get up in time for school. I thought I could do it all but it was just too hard. So I dropped out.” (Flagstaff)

“The subsidy is really not enough to live on. Especially if you want to finish up school and take school seriously. I was in school full time trying to finish my High School degree. I really couldn’t work, but I had no choice. I had to get a job. This made things a lot harder.” (Phoenix)

Budgeting and Finance

When participants were asked to identify the area that gave them the most concern as they made the transition from being in foster care to being on their own, budgeting and finances were almost universally mentioned. Having enough money to pay the bills, keeping finances

straight, understanding financial issues, such as credit history and debt, and the role they play in being fully independent all weighed heavily on these youths' minds.

For some youth, financial and budgeting problems were the first kinds of difficulties they encountered when moving out on their own:

“Definitely managing the money was the hardest. You see, all of the sudden you’ve got all this money and all this freedom. I spent all my money on party stuff. But then the electric bill arrives and you ain't got any money left. That was hard.” (Phoenix)

“The hardest thing is the reality... the reality of paying bills. Money comes and goes fast. You don't realize it. I was working on and off and money was real tight. Sometimes I had to go without food just to pay all the bills. Keeping it all together is harder than it seems.” (Phoenix)

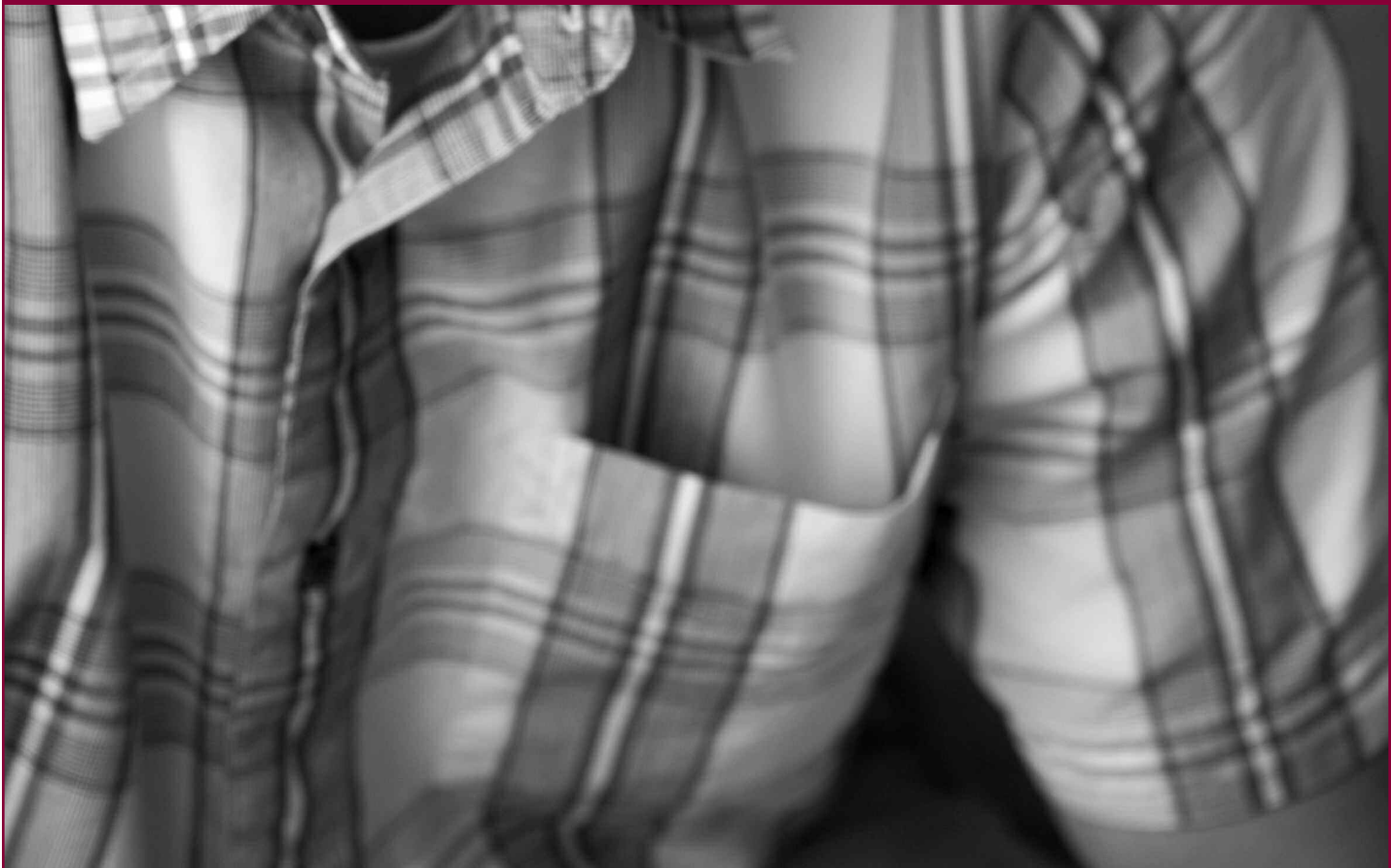
Participants described the kinds of budgeting and finance issues addressed in Independent Living classes. The skills covered included how to write a check, how to open a savings account, and how to create a family budget. Most youth said that they knew these basic concepts prior to taking Independent Living classes. Some noted that the budgeting and finance classes were more “play” exercises than really having the opportunity to test one’s skills.

“It is one thing to talk about money in (Independent Living) class. It wasn't real. But it was another thing when you were on your own. Your friends are like, ‘Let's go’.....and now I am behind on a couple bills.” (Tucson)

Budgeting and finance was so significant that youth identified it as the most important skill to cultivate in order to make a successful transition.



Appendix B: Relevant State Laws



Children: Child Welfare and Placement

ARS §8-521. Independent living program; conditions; eligibility; rules; reports

- A. The department or a licensed child welfare agency may establish an independent living program for youths who are the subject of a dependency petition or who are adjudicated dependent and are all of the following:
1. In the custody of the department or a licensed child welfare agency.
 2. At least seventeen years of age.
 3. Employed or full-time students.
- B. The independent living program may consist of a residential program of less than twenty-four hours' a day supervision for youths under the supervision of the department through a licensed child welfare agency or a foster home under contract with the department. Under the independent living program the youth is not required to reside at a licensed child welfare agency or foster home.
- C. The director or the director's designee shall review and approve any recommendation to the court that a youth in the custody of the department be ordered to an independent living program.
- D. For a youth to participate in an independent living program, the court must order such a disposition pursuant to section 8-845.
- E. The department or a licensed child welfare agency having custody of the youth shall provide

the cost of care as required by section 46-134 for each child placed in an independent living program pursuant to this section, except that the monthly amount provided shall not exceed the average monthly cost of purchased services for the child in the three months immediately preceding placement in an independent living program.

- F. The department shall adopt rules pursuant to title 41, chapter 6 to carry out the purposes of this section.
- G. The department shall provide quarterly progress reports to the court and to local foster care review boards for each youth participating in the independent living program.
- H. The local foster care review boards shall review at least once every six months the case of each youth participating in the independent living program.

ARS §8-521.01. Transitional independent living program

- A. The department may establish a transitional independent living program for persons who meet the following qualifications:
1. The person is under twenty-one years of age.
 2. The person was the subject of a dependency petition, adjudicated dependent or placed voluntarily pursuant to section 8-806.
- B. The department shall provide care and services that complement the person's own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and to accept personal

responsibility for preparing for and making the transition to adulthood. The care and services provided shall be based on an individualized written agreement between the department and the person.

- C. Care and services may be provided as follows:
1. If the person was in out-of-home placement or in the independent living program when the person became eighteen years of age, the department may provide out-of-home placement, independent living or other transitional living support services.
 2. If the person was in out-of-home placement in the custody of the department while the person was sixteen, seventeen or eighteen years of age, the department may provide transitional living support services.

**Section of
Public Health and Safety:
AHCCCS**

ARS §36-2901. Definitions

In this article, unless the context otherwise requires:

- ...
6. "Eligible person" means any person who is:
 - (a) Any of the following:

...

 - (iii) Under twenty-one years of age and who was in the custody of the department of economic security pursuant to title 8, chapter 5 or 10 when the person became eighteen years of age.

**Section of
Welfare: Department of
Economic Security**

**ARS §46-134. Powers and duties;
expenditure; limitation**

- A. The state department shall:
2. Administer child welfare activities, including:

...

 - (c) Providing the cost of care of:
 - (iii) Children who are the subject of a dependency petition or are adjudicated dependent and who are in the custody of the department and ordered by the court pursuant to section 8-845 to reside in an independent living program pursuant to section 8-521.
- ...
14. Provide the cost of care and transitional independent living services for a person under twenty-one years of age pursuant to section 8-521.01.

Appendix C: Endnotes

1. Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates. 2003. "Public Opinion About Youth Transitioning From Foster Care to Adulthood," prepared for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.
2. Science, Vol. 305, 30 July 2004, page 596, <http://www.theteenbrain.com/pubs/science2004.pdf>.
3. National Resource Center for Youth Development, The University of Oklahoma. 2004. The Transition Years: Serving Current and Former Foster Youth Ages Eighteen to Twenty-One. National Resource Center for Youth Services of the College of Education
4. Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2004. Kids Count Data Book 2004: State Profiles of Child Well-Being. Baltimore, MD.
5. Cook, R. McLean, J. and Ansell, D. 1991. A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth (Vol. 1). Maryland. WESTAT.
6. Levin-Epstein, J. & Greenberg, M. (Eds.). 2003. Leave No Youth Behind: Opportunities for Congress to Reach Disconnected Youth. Center for Law and Social Policy. Washington, D.C.
7. Foster, E., et. al., 2004 "Special Populations and Transitions to Adulthood: Challenges to Policies and Research," On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy, Richard A. Stettersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenburg, Jr., Ruben G. Rumbaur, Eds. Chicago University Press.
8. Leathers, S. & Testa, M. 1999. Older wards study: Case managers' report on the status of DCFS wards aged 17 and one-half years old and older. Springfield, Illinois. Department of Children and Family Services, Office of Research Director.
9. Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19, Mark E. Courtney and Amy Dworsky, Chapin Hall, Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2005.
10. Pecora PJ, Kessler RC, Williams J., et al. 2005. Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. (Revised)
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): Substance Use and Need for Treatment Among Youths Who Have Been in Foster Care, February 18, 2005.
14. Altshuler, S. & Poertner, J. 2002. The child health and illness profile-adolescent addition: Assessing well-being in group homes or institutions. Child Welfare, 81(3).
15. Johnson-Reid, M., & Barth, R. 2000, From Placement to Prison: The Path to Adolescent Incarceration from Child Welfare Supervised Foster or Group Care, Children and Youth Services Review, Vol. 22, No.7.
16. Siegel, G and Halemba, G, The Arizona Dual Jurisdiction Youth Study: Final Report. National Center for Juvenile Justice. December 2004. This research considered juvenile cases in Cochise, Coconino, Maricopa, and Pima counties. While the study does not cover all Arizona counties, it is the best data available on youth involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems in Arizona.
17. Ibid.
18. Eligible youth for ETV assistance include those who were: in out of home care in the custody of DES or a licensed child welfare agency at age 16 or older, former foster youth age 18 to 21 who were in the custody of DES or a licensed child welfare agency, youth adopted from foster care at age 16 or older, or youth participating in the state ETV program at age 21. Assistance is available for eligible youth in the program at age 21 up to the date the youth turns 23 years of age.
19. DES program policy is not clearly delineated. Therefore, casework practice is inconsistent as to which youth may remain in care on a voluntary basis and which youth are told by DES case managers that they do not have the option to remain in foster care even if they would voluntarily agree to do so.
20. A.R.S. §8-521. See Appendix B.
21. A.R.S. §8-521.01. See Appendix B.
22. A.R.S. §36.2901(6) (a) (iii). See Appendix B. Eligible youth include youth who are in or who have left DES foster care after reaching age 18.
23. See Endnote 18 for program eligibility requirements of the Federal Education and Training Voucher program. In FY 2004, this program provided 111 vouchers to Arizona youth.
24. Unless otherwise noted, all DES data reflected in this report is taken from the current or previous reports of the Arizona Department of Economic Security, Division of Children, Youth & Families, Child Welfare Reporting Requirements,

- Semi Annual Report. For the period October 1, 2004 to March 31, 2005. <http://www.azdes.gov/dcyf/cps/pdf/04-04-09-04.pdf>
25. Federal Fiscal Year 2003 Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) and Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Annual Report from the Arizona Department of Economic Security to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
 26. From October 1, 2003 through September 30, 2004.
 27. Department of Economic Security, Child Welfare Reporting Requirements, Semi-Annual Report for the period April 1, 2004 to March 31, 2005. <http://www.azdes.gov/dcyf/cps/pdf/10-03-03-04.pdf>.
 28. Siegel, G and Halemba, G. "The Arizona Dual Jurisdiction Youth Study: Final Report. National Center for Juvenile Justice. December 2004.
 29. Although DES can track the number of youth who have left foster care because of being transferred to another agency, DES is unable to identify the agency. It is known that some of these transfers are to the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections.
 30. Howell, J., Kelly, M., Palmer, J., and Mangum, R. 2004. Integrating Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, and Other Agencies in a Continuum of Services. Child Welfare League of America.
 31. Siegel, G and Halemba, G. "The Arizona Dual Jurisdiction Youth Study: Final Report. National Center for Juvenile Justice. December 2004. This research reviewed the cases of all youth who were dependent some time during 2002 and reviewed their delinquency histories from age eight through August 2003.
 32. Email communication with Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections, October 2004.
 33. These figures only consider those youth that are at a point in time both foster youth and in the state's juvenile facilities. It does not necessarily count youth who were foster children, became incarcerated and whose case was then dismissed from the state's foster care system (DES refers to these cases as "transferred to another agency").
 34. A.R.S. §8-521.01 B.
 35. Phone conversation with Beverlee Kroll, DES Independent Living Specialist, May 2, 2005; updated via email on June 7, 2005.
 36. National Low Income Housing Center, Out of Reach, 2004. This report is based on data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
 37. John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, Sec. 477 (b) (3) (D).
 38. In Tucson, Casey Family Programs and DES staff contacted potential youth participants and invited them to participate in a focus group discussion.
 39. These data are based on project participant surveys. Not all participants completed a survey. Figures here represent information from 35 project respondents. While we did not collect specific statistics on race or ethnicity, youth of a variety of races and ethnicities, including multi-racial youth, participated in these discussions.
 40. CMDP is the Comprehensive Medical and Dental Program operated by DES and that provides the medical insurance coverage for children in foster care.



4001 N. 3rd Street, Suite 160
Phoenix, AZ 85012
(602) 266-0707

2850 N. Swan Road, Suite 160
Tucson, AZ 85712
(520) 795-4199

www.azchildren.org