

# Recommendations for Child Welfare System Support from Youth Currently and Formerly in Foster Care

Prepared by RTI  
International

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## Background

The Survey of Youth Transitioning from Foster Care (SYTFC) was conducted by RTI International through a contract from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), in collaboration with ACF's Children's Bureau. The SYTFC was implemented as part of the [Domestic Human Trafficking and the Child Welfare Population](#) project and designed to assist ACF to identify and better assist children and youth served by its programs who are victims of or are at increased risk of human trafficking. The SYTFC was conducted to address knowledge gaps and to provide the child welfare (CW) system with information needed to identify and support youth in care who are at risk of human trafficking.

➤ Youth currently and formerly in foster care in two states who participated in the SYTFC were asked:

What are the most important things the child welfare agency could do to support young people leaving foster care?

The SYTFC gathered firsthand information from youth currently and formerly in foster care at increased risk of human trafficking based on their demographic characteristics, maltreatment allegations, and removal and placement history. Of the 335 youth participating in the SYTFC, over one-half (56%) reported still being involved with the CW system through foster care or the receipt of services.

A goal of the SYTFC was to identify services and supports that may help youth currently and formerly in foster care who are at risk of human trafficking. The survey collected information on risk and protective factors that may influence whether youth have these experiences. Youth were asked about their work and education, health, behaviors, and social support system. They were also asked about their involvement with the CW system, places they have lived, and services and support they receive now or received in the past. During the survey, youth were given the opportunity to share recommendations for CW system support in their own words.

A findings report details the full SYTFC methods and study results (Dolan et al., 2022). This brief focuses on the qualitative recommendations provided by youth who participated in the SYTFC when asked about the most important ways the CW system could support youth leaving care.

## **Purpose of the Brief**

In 2020, 20,010 youth emancipated or aged out of foster care (DHHS, 2021). This transition period to independent adulthood is an important life stage for youth leaving the foster care system. Engaging in programs designed to support a successful transition out of foster care is associated with positive outcomes including educational and vocational attainment, strong interpersonal relationships, and stable housing (Greeson et al., 2020). Federal laws (e.g., 1999 John H. Chafee Foster Care Program

for Successful Transition to Adulthood [Chafee program]; 2001 Chafee Education and Training Vouchers Program; 2008 Fostering Connections Act; 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act) provide funding to states and territories, including tribes, for supports for older youth (age 14+) transitioning from foster care and require case planning to promote successful transitions out of foster care. In recent years, calls have been made to incorporate feedback and lived experiences of youth currently and formerly in foster care to inform the future directions of policy and program development (e.g., Forenza, 2018; Greeson et al., 2020). This brief summarizes recommendations from youth currently and formerly in foster care who participated in the SYTFC. Specifically, youth were asked how the CW system could best support their transition from care.

## **Method**

The SYTFC was designed to be a one-time survey of youth currently and formerly in foster care at increased risk for human trafficking in the CW system. CW agencies in Florida and New York provided CW administrative data from which the SYTFC youth sample was drawn. Both states extend foster care to youth to age 21 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). The sampling frame consisted of youth who were in foster care during their 17th year and who were 18 or 19 years old at the time of the survey. The SYTFC sample included (1) substantiated and unsubstantiated allegations of human trafficking for one site (Florida) and (2) the

application of a trafficking risk model using CW administrative data provided by both sites (Florida and New York).

As such, the resulting sample is only representative of youth who were in foster care at some point during their 17th year who were at increased risk for human trafficking.

A total of 3,351 deidentified youth cases submitted by states met criteria for inclusion in the sampling frame. A sample of 1,086 youth cases with the highest predicted probabilities of trafficking risk was identified. A total of 709 sampled youth cases were released to interviewers for contacting and recruiting. Surveys were completed with 335 youth for a 48% response rate.

The SYTFC was designed to collect information directly from youth shortly after their 18th birthday to avoid missing those who may be transitioning from care and to strengthen recall. Sampled youth were contacted by mail and telephone and offered SYTFC participation. The survey consisted of an interviewer-administered telephone interview followed by a respondent-administered web survey. This brief examines responses to the SYTFC open-ended question asking youth, “What are the most important things the [state] child welfare agency could do to support young people leaving foster care?” This item was initially administered during the telephone interview and then repeated as part of the web survey. The question was repeated in the web survey to provide an additional opportunity for respondents to make recommendations.

Out of the 335 youth approached, nearly 200 (N = 197) took the opportunity to

respond to this voluntary, open-ended question. If a respondent provided an answer to the telephone interview and web survey, study team compared the responses. If the responses were the same, the response was coded as a single response. If responses to the telephone interview and web survey differed, the responses were coded as two distinct responses. After removing duplicate responses across the telephone interview and web survey data, the study team coded and grouped responses into themes. Youth could provide multiple recommendations and thus endorse more than one theme.

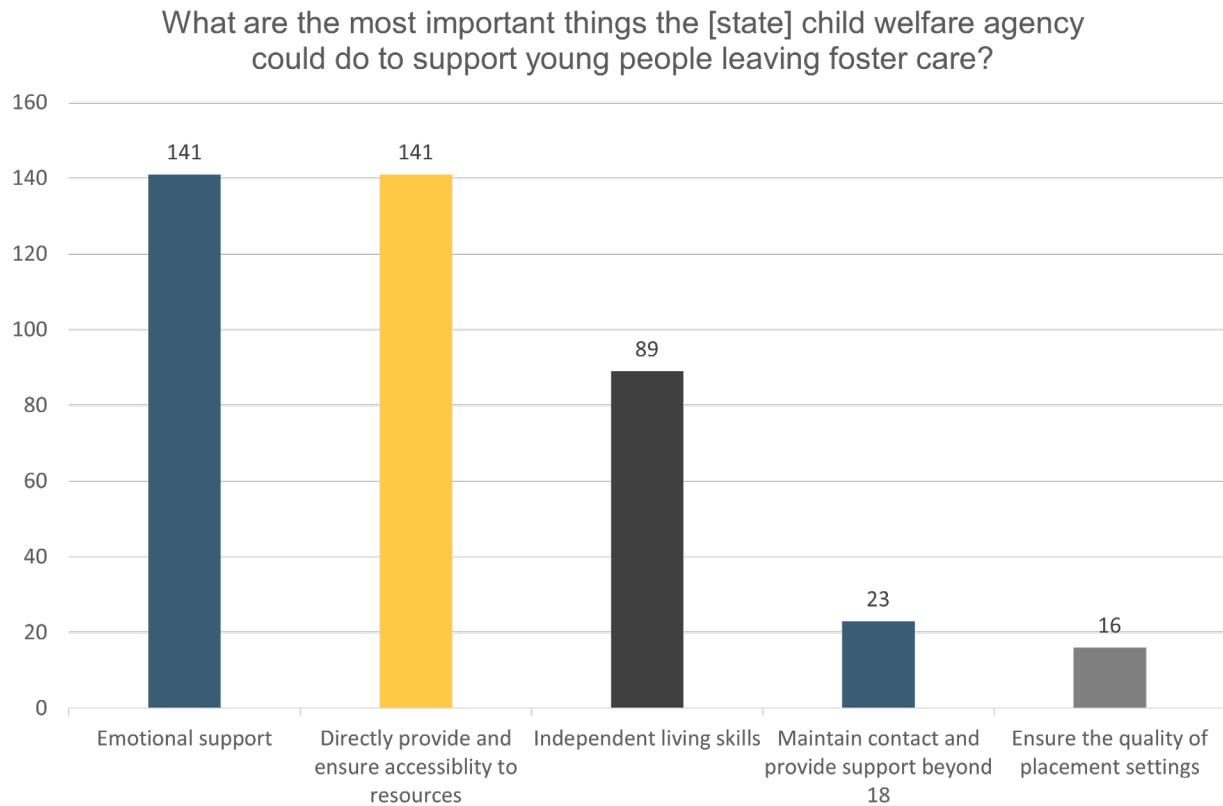
## Results

Five common themes were identified: (1) engage with youth in a supportive, understanding, and nonjudgmental manner; (2) directly provide and ensure accessibility to resources; (3) coordinate the acquisition of independent living skills; (4) maintain contact and support beyond the age of 18; and (5) confirm quality of placement settings. *Figure 1* shows the frequency of youth who endorsed each theme.

### ❖ *Engage with youth in a supportive, understanding, and nonjudgmental manner*

Approximately 72% (N = 141) of responding youth expressed the desire to be listened to, heard, and emotionally supported. General statements included “Support,” “Understanding,” “Care more,” and “Listen to the kids.” Respondents frequently provided additional suggestions

**Figure 1. Frequency of Youth Responses by Theme**



to engage with youth in a nonjudgmental way. One youth stated, “The trauma and pain us young adults endured wasn’t our fault,” while another said, “Pay attention to what they are saying rather than assuming or rationalizing their behavior—be open to listening.” This topic also included youths’ desire for mental health support to ensure a “stable” transition out of foster care.

❖ ***Directly provide and ensure youth accessibility to resources***

Approximately 72% (N = 141) of responding youth suggested CW agencies provide additional resources to assist in the transition from foster care. The most common resources included direct financial support and housing

arrangements. General statements included “Resources,” “Financial help,” and “Housing,” while other responses made specific recommendations, including cash assistance, financial compensation for those whose case is closed early, and funds for college tuition. More specific recommendations related to housing included “A place to stay without worrying about bills or evictions” and “Make sure they have somewhere to go when they age out.” Other youth made innovative recommendations for disseminating resources and opportunities (e.g., create a QR code for youth to scan for a list of resources).

❖ ***Coordinate youth acquisition of independent living skills***

Approximately 45% (N = 89) of responding youth advocated for life skills training to better prepare them for independent living in adulthood. This suggestion differed from “provide additional resources” in that youth expressed the desire to learn how to independently obtain resources, rather than being directly provided the resource (e.g., financial assistance) by CW agencies. General statements included “What to do when leaving and in real world” or “Independent living skills.” Other youth were more specific in their responses, which included learning how to create a bank account, obtain a license, enroll in college, file taxes, find a job, pay a bill, create a budget, and go grocery shopping.

❖ ***Maintain contact and provide support beyond the age of 18***

Approximately 12% (N = 23) of responding youth suggested CW agencies provide more opportunities to continue personal relationships that started in foster care after transitioning to independent adulthood. Responses indicated disappointment around ending meaningful relationships (e.g., caseworkers, foster parents) within the CW system. For example, one youth said, “Let young adults connect with caseworkers they connected with.”

❖ ***Ensure the quality of placement settings***

Approximately 8% (N = 16) of responding youth recommended that CW agencies confirm the quality of placement settings.

Recommendations included, “do more research on placements for foster care” and “evaluate foster families more.”

## Discussion

Youth currently and formerly in foster care have invaluable lived experiences that can inform CW policies and programs. The SYTFC provided youth the opportunity to share their recommendations on how the CW system could best support their transition from foster care.

Youth participating in the SYTFC expressed the desire to be heard and listened to by others, to have high quality placement options, and to maintain meaningful relationships with individuals within foster care placements after transitioning to independent adulthood. According to the literature, youth report feeling more engaged with services when they feel heard and use their own voice to advocate for change (Salazar et al., 2021). Meaningful life changes, including transitioning out of foster care, is often successful by empowering youth to make the changes themselves (Kaplan et al., 2009). Prioritizing efforts to ensure that youth transitioning from foster care feel heard and connected to others is essential, given the gap in health and well-being programs (including mental health) for transitioning foster care youth (Greeson et al., 2020) and the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health outcomes and social networks (Kovacs et al., 2021; Twenge & Joiner, 2020).

In addition to the desire for emotional support and meaningful relationships,

youth recommended CW agencies provide more tangible resources (e.g., financial assistance, housing) to assist in the transition to adulthood. Youth also recommended CW agencies provide more life skills training opportunities to increase preparedness and confidence as they move toward independent living. Randomized controlled trials yielded promising results for life skills programs for youth transitioning out of foster care. For example, MY LIFE (Portland, Oregon; Powers et al., 2012) provides 12 months of training and mentoring to identify goals, engage in experiential practice, and improve networking and is associated with higher rates of achievement compared to

control groups (Powers et al., 2012; Geenen et al., 2013). Finally, SYTFC responses exhibited innovative ideas that may be useful for the development of new programs. For example, one individual suggested disseminating information and opportunities with a QR code to reach more youth. Including foster care youth in program development may lead to innovative programming while simultaneously providing an opportunity for youth to take ownership of programs, thereby increasing buy-in and empowering youth to be leaders and collaborators alongside community members, researchers, and the CW system.

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