



Pennsylvania CASA Association

A project developed by the 2024
Emerging Leaders Fellowship

Older Youth Advocacy Toolkit

An overview of the challenges & opportunities of supporting young adults transitioning from foster care

Disclaimer

This report includes the perspectives, insights, and expertise shared by a group of three young adults all part of Pennsylvania CASA's Emerging Leaders Fellowship with experience in foster care. One of the purposes of the Fellowship is to uplift and share the voices of those with lived experience to inform future policies and practices.

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PA CASA would like to thank the following local programs for participating in a needs assessment when developing this toolkit:

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Cumberland County CASA
Dauphin County CASA



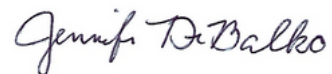
Message From Our President and CEO

Dear colleagues,

In 2020, a period of civil unrest spurred by racial injustices in the country led many organizations, including PA CASA, to renew their commitment to diversity, inclusion, equity, belonging, and acceptance (DEIAB). We established a DEI Committee with network-wide participation and the Social Justice Institute (SJI) for a smaller number of programs wanting to invest even deeper in this topic. Through data collection and training, local programs began identifying and addressing disparities in volunteer recruitment, retention, and children's cases. This foundation allowed us to enhance training, advocate for change, and engage in courageous conversations within our child welfare communities.

We made significant progress, but our work continues beyond there. Integrating lived experiences is part of our broader organizational strategies and continuous learning. Our intention is to listen to those we serve, seek to understand, and adjust our policies and procedures to address what we hear. This ongoing process involves all aspects of our work, demonstrating our commitment to continuous improvement. PA CASA's Emerging Leaders Fellowship, which you will read more about within this document, was established as part of this initiative.

This document exemplifies the transformative work that can be achieved by engaging those with lived experience. When we started the Emerging Leaders Fellowship, we knew something powerful would come out of this incredible group of young people. However, we could not have imagined something so practical and useful that would help improve outcomes for all future youth served by CASA. Please read, discuss, and use the tools provided to advocate for the children to have the support and opportunities they need to thrive.



Jennifer DeBalko
President and CEO



Toolkit Contents

Our Vision	4
Introduction	5
Data and Outcomes for Transition Age Youth	7
Education	9
Employment	13
Housing	17
Health and Well Being	19
Independent Living Services	31
Authentic Youth Engagement	35
Recommendations From Our Lived Experience Experts	36
Youth Advocacy Organizations	39
Helplines and Hotlines	40
Older Youth Advocacy Assessment Checklist	41
References	44

Emerging Leaders Fellowship

Our Vision

In August 2023, Pennsylvania CASA Association (PA CASA) launched its first Emerging Leaders Fellowship program cohort. This eight-month paid virtual advocacy Fellowship was a professional development opportunity for three individuals with lived experience in foster care. Throughout this Fellowship, the individuals worked closely with PA CASA staff to enhance their leadership skills, expand their professional network, and learn more about taking a role in advocating for themselves and their peers. During the monthly meetings, participants engaged in topics, including child welfare policy, data advocacy, storytelling, legislative advocacy, and professional development opportunities such as resume building, job interviews, presentation skills, and financial literacy.

The Fellowship allowed participants to lead, learn, and implement their ideas within the CASA network's programming. The Emerging Leader Fellows and PA CASA staff, Idelia Robinson-Confer, collaborated to create this toolkit designed for the PA CASA network of local programs and those advocates supporting older youth in Pennsylvania's foster care system. Each of the Fellows have shared their insights and expertise to develop practices for engaging youth and young adults. The toolkit provides information on the unique needs of older youth and available resources in Pennsylvania related to housing, employment, education, health, and independent living. It also emphasizes the importance of youth voice and authentic engagement, empowering them to take ownership of their lives and gain the confidence to achieve their full potential.

We are excited to introduce the 2023-2024 Emerging Leaders Fellowship Project: Older Youth Advocacy Toolkit. Throughout the toolkit, click on the [red links](#) to access additional resources designed to support older youth.

Introduction

Unique Needs of Older Youth

This toolkit is designed to highlight the unique needs of transition-age youth in foster care. Transition-age youth (TAY) refers to youth ages 14 and older who are transitioning out of the foster care system and into adulthood.¹ Research highlights that older youth in foster care spend more time in care than those who enter before age 14.² The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical time when individuals experience significant changes in their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Young people need to have opportunities for healthy brain and social development during adolescence and early adulthood. Foster youth have unique developmental needs and experiences that differ from those of their peers.

In 2021, 28 percent of Pennsylvania's foster care population was aged 14 or older.³ It's crucial that we continue to identify opportunities to provide access to education and employment, stable housing, permanent connections, extracurricular activities, and community involvement. Engaging in these activities can help individuals develop communication skills, form supportive relationships, interact socially, and improve their overall well-being.

In 2021, approximately 77 percent of eligible youth in foster care aged 14–21 left care without receiving federally funded services for transitioning to adulthood and independent living.⁴ This toolkit acknowledges the importance of connecting individuals with the information and resources to make well-informed decisions about their transition to adulthood.

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“While collaborating with our Emerging Leader Fellows, we discovered significant gaps in our understanding of the range of resources available for transition-age youth. It's crucial for young people to be well-informed about the supports designed to assist them.

The goal of this toolkit is to raise awareness of the challenges faced by older youth and the resources available to them. Importantly, this toolkit is a tool for us to work alongside them, ensuring that we are actively engaging and supporting them throughout their journey. We must educate ourselves and do our research to ensure that these resources are accessible to the youth we serve.

Thank you, Emerging Leader Fellows Chloe, Kierstyn, and Marshall for your dedication to improving the outcomes of Pennsylvania's youth and families. I am grateful to have worked alongside each of you.”

-Idelia Robinson-Confer, Impact Project Coordinator

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Data and Outcomes for Transition-Age Foster Youth

Each year, approximately 20,000 youth age out of foster care, facing significant challenges and limited support.⁵ Aging out refers to the time when a young adult leaves the child welfare system without being returned home or placed with family through adoption or guardianship.⁶ The current outcomes of youth aging out include a higher risk of housing instability, involvement with the criminal justice system, mental health challenges, and financial insecurity.



Justice Involvement

25 percent of foster youth will be in prison within two years of leaving foster care.



Housing Instability

Within two years of leaving care, over 40 percent of youth aging out will experience housing instability.



Employment

Only 50 percent of youth experiencing foster care attain full- or part-time employment by the age of 21.

Transition-age foster youth are

2x

more likely to become pregnant compared to the general population

• • • • •

25%

25 percent of youth in foster care will not receive a high school diploma or GED

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2022). Child Welfare and Foster Care Statistics.

Disparities and Disproportionality

- Black children are **6 times** more likely to re-enter foster care than white children and more than **3.5 times** more likely to exit and remain in foster care than white children.⁷
- In Pennsylvania, Black children represent **35 percent** of the foster care population despite only making up **13 percent** of the total child population.⁸
- In Pennsylvania, black children are **more likely** to be placed in institutions and disproportionately placed in pre-adoptive homes.⁹
- LGBTQ+ youth are **over-represented** in the foster care system. They experience **higher rates** of maltreatment, violence, and traumatic experiences. They are at **greater risk** of discrimination, institutionalization, and abuse.¹⁰

Congregate Care

- In 2022, Pennsylvania had only **57.9 percent** of young people leaving foster care placed in family-based settings, while **one-third** were placed in congregate care settings like shelters, residential or congregate care.¹¹

Trends in Pennsylvania

According to a report by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, data on transition-age youth in foster care in Pennsylvania reveals both promising and concerning trends.

Findings include:¹²

48%

A 48 percent reduction in the number of children in foster care from 2006 to 2021

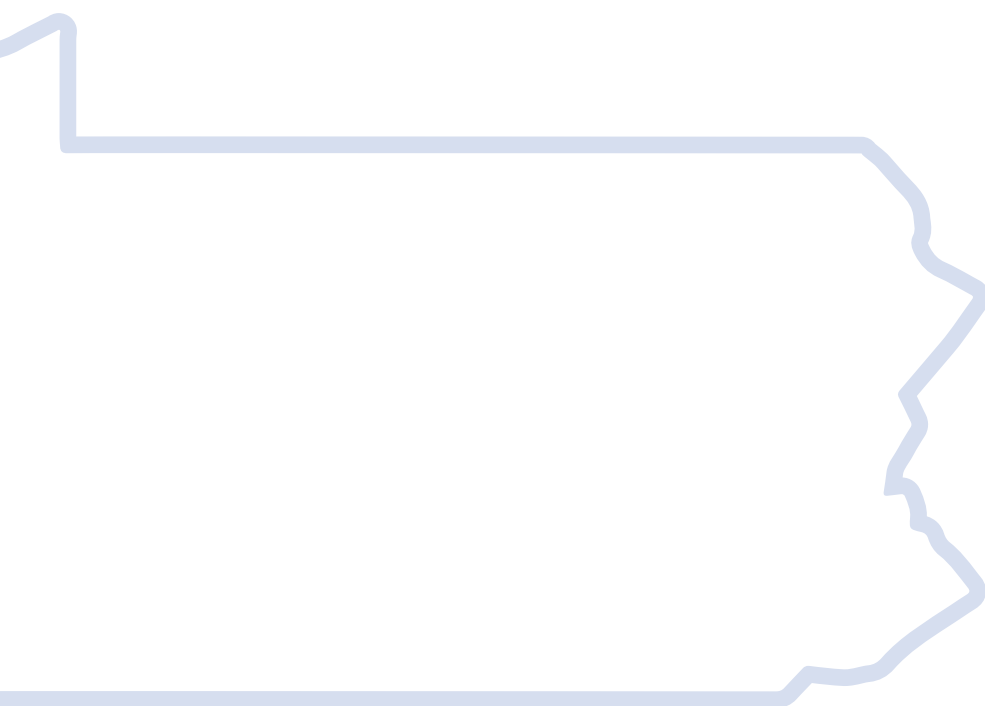


Increased kinship care placements have contributed to a decrease in group care placements



Despite the availability of extended foster care for youth over 18 years, participation rates remain low

- The primary reason for placement is neglect, often linked to poverty rather than abuse
- Youth continue to face challenges in achieving permanency upon exiting care



Education

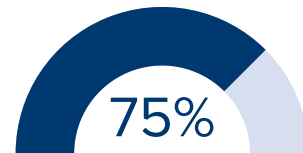
Education provides young people with the knowledge and skills to pursue careers and achieve financial independence. However, young people with a background in foster care face significant challenges when it comes to succeeding in their education. One challenge is education disruptions caused by housing instability, leading to poor academic progress, lack of consistent support, and disconnection from peers. Research indicates that each school change results in losing four to six months of academic progress.¹³

Another barrier for foster youth is the presence of mental and behavioral health challenges. Youth often enter foster care due to a form of abuse or neglect, which, combined with their removal from family and community, as well as navigating the complexities of the child welfare system, results in trauma. Consequently, this impacts their ability to focus on education, engage in school activities, and build relationships in school. Research suggests that only 75 percent of youth in foster care will receive a high school diploma or GED, highlighting the disparities in education access and attainment for foster youth.¹⁴

Local education agencies (LEAs) and county children and youth agencies are required to have points of contact to ensure the stability and enrollment of children and youth.¹⁵

- In the child welfare system, these individuals are known as education liaisons. You can search the directory [here](#).
- In a school environment, the individuals in charge of foster care are referred to as Foster Care Points of Contact. You can search the directory [here](#).

One school change
results in losing
4-6 months
of academic progress



of Pennsylvania youth
experiencing foster care
receive their high school
diploma or GED by age 21

Advocacy Tip!

- ✓ CASA volunteers can play a significant role in advocating for children and youths' educational needs. You can learn more about the rights of students in foster care [here](#).



Education Pathways

It's essential for youth who experience time in foster care to be prepared for any path they take, whether it's entering the workforce, joining the military, or pursuing further education. You can find resources for various career paths below.



GED Classes

It's important to understand that individuals have different educational pathways. One pathway may include obtaining a high school equivalency diploma or GED. You can find local GED courses [here](#).



Career and Technical Education

Career and technical education (CTE) in Pennsylvania offers students the opportunity to develop skills through a combination of classes and hands-on learning experiences to graduate high school prepared for college, a career, and their community. To view Pennsylvania's CTE programs, click [here](#). You can also review the most recent brochure on CTEs in Pennsylvania [here](#).



Associate's Degree and Certificate Programs

Obtaining an associate degree or certificate program can provide valuable skills and knowledge that can pave the way to a successful career. You can view a list of the fifteen community colleges in Pennsylvania [here](#). In addition, you can find a list of certificate programs related to technology, cosmetology, aviation, automotive, arts, and culinary [here](#).



Four-Year Degree

Earning a four-year degree can provide access to higher-paying jobs and opportunities for career growth. To find a list of education institutions by category and location in Pennsylvania, click [here](#). You can also explore a map of Pennsylvania educational opportunities [here](#).



Military Resources

A young person may also be interested in exploring opportunities within the military as a potential pathway for their future. You can learn more about the different pathways at websites like [GoArmy.com](#), [Navy.com](#), [AirForce.com](#), and [Marines.com](#) and locate a local recruiting office to receive more information about the training programs available. Some military branches may offer education programs such as ROTC or Reserve Officers' Training Corps for students in college, which provide scholarships and training in exchange for a commitment to serve. Learn more about the ROTC program [here](#).

Higher Education

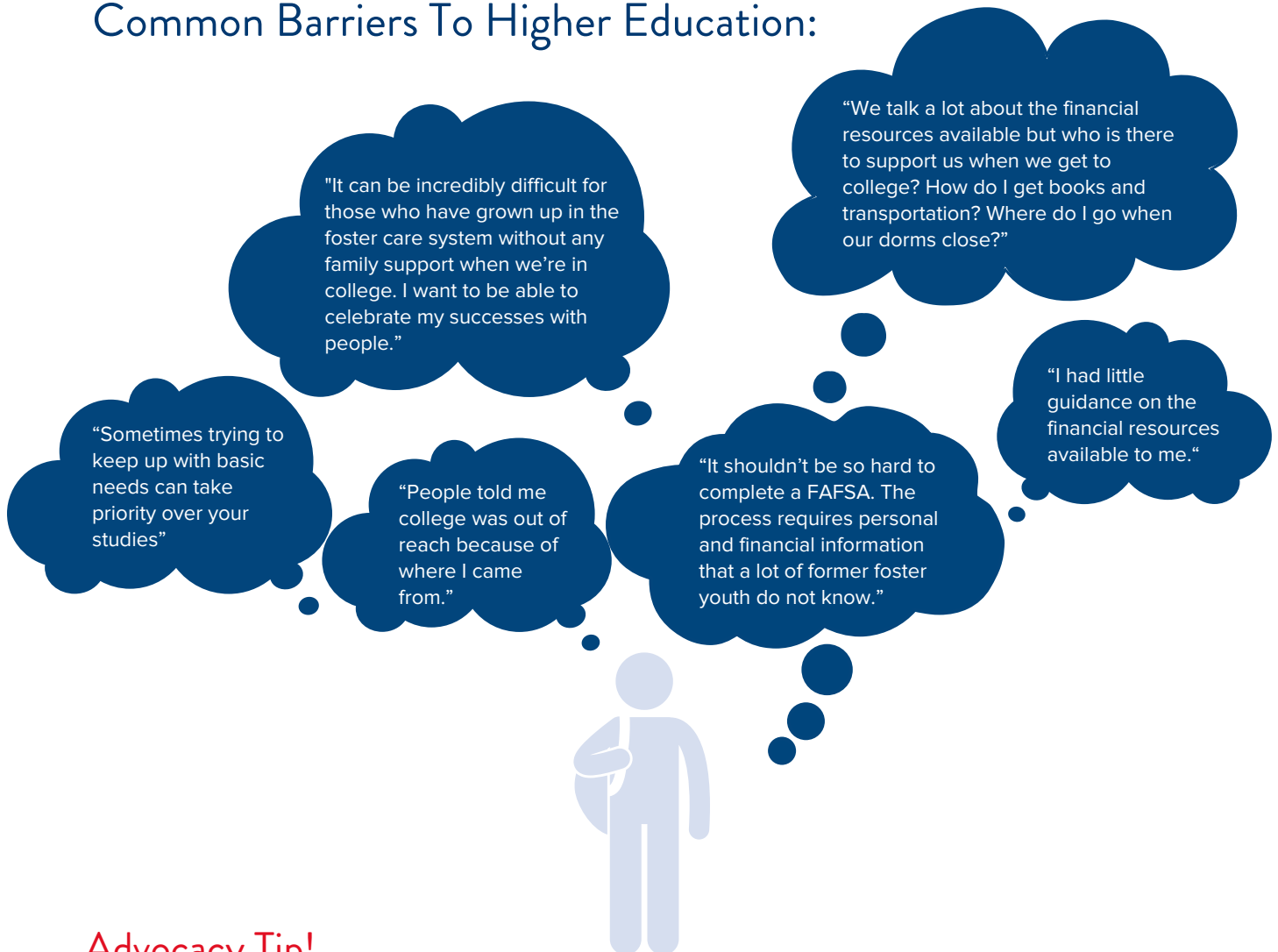
Youth in foster care should have the same opportunities for higher education and training as their counterparts who have not experienced foster care. Unfortunately, those with experience in foster care are less likely to pursue higher education.

Did you know?

Fewer than **10%** of youth transitioning out of foster care will obtain a two-year or four-year college degree.¹⁶

Yet, studies have found that over **70%** of youth in foster care aspire to attend college.¹⁷

Common Barriers To Higher Education:



Advocacy Tip!

- ✓ While pursuing a college degree can bring many benefits, it may not always be the pathway for everyone. It is important to have conversations with young people to understand their unique interests, talents, and career goals.

Higher Education Resources

In efforts to improve outcomes for youth in foster care, several higher education resources are available in Pennsylvania for former or current foster youth, including the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, the Chafee Employment and Training Grant, the Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver, and Pennsylvania Campus Support Programs.



Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Former and current foster youth must complete the FAFSA to qualify for state and federal financial aid. The FAFSA asks, "At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent or ward of the court?" If yes, the student will be considered "independent" and qualify for financial resources.



Chafee Education and Training Grant (Chafee ETG) Program

This program, which the federal government funds, grants undergraduate students from Pennsylvania with experience in foster care who attend a post-secondary institution and meet the eligibility requirements. To be eligible, students must be residents of Pennsylvania, have been in foster care since the age of 16, be under 21 when applying, and be enrolled in a college or university. Former and current foster youth are eligible for this grant until age 26.

The maximum award was \$5,000 for the 2023-24 year. However, the maximum award amount is subject to change based on the levels of Federal Grants.



Fostering Tuition Waiver

As of fall 2020, Pennsylvania law now allows youth in the Pennsylvania foster care system at age 16 or older to receive a tuition and fee waiver. If you are a Pennsylvania resident and eligible for the PA Chafee Education and Training Grant, you can receive the waiver, but it has to be a Title IV school OR school approved by the Department of Education.

It is important to note that this waiver applies after all grants and scholarships and does not cover room and board costs.



Campus Supports

Campus support programs were created to provide students who have experience in foster care with campus programs and services that can help support their educational journey. Many colleges and universities offer programs with housing, scholarships, workshops, social events, mentoring, academic resources, and emergency assistance. This support looks different for each educational institution.

A list of higher education points of contact can be found on the Center for Schools and Communities at [Foster Care Contact Directory](#).

Employment

Employment is crucial in the lives of young people who have experienced time in foster care, serving as a pathway for independence and stability. As these individuals transition to adulthood, they need to have the opportunity to develop a sense of responsibility, acquire new skills, and build social connections. Youth with foster care experience often face unique challenges compared to their peers, as they may not have the same opportunities to rely on their families for economic support or to develop the skills needed for job readiness.¹⁸

Research indicates that **22 percent** of employed youth who have experienced foster care do not earn enough to rise out of poverty,¹⁹ with **71 percent** earning less than \$25,000 a year,²⁰ only exacerbating the barriers to employment and economic mobility.

Barriers to Securing Meaningful Employment:



Educational Gaps

Young people who spend time in foster care often experience disruptions to their education, which can impact their employment opportunities.

Limited Work Experience & Life Skills

A lack of work experience and life skills can put young people at a disadvantage when entering the workforce.

Transportation

Transportation is a significant barrier to finding employment, particularly in rural areas where there is a lack of public transportation services. While public transportation is more available in urban areas, it may not always meet the needs of young people. Some of the challenges associated with public transportation include extended waiting times and restricted hours.

Transportation

Transportation and learning to drive present significant challenges for young people in foster care. These obstacles include the high cost of DMV fees, limited access to driving education, insurance rates, and the financial burden of purchasing a vehicle. You can find a list of resources for transportation below.



The Car Maintenance Checklist

You or someone you know can follow this car maintenance [checklist](#) that outlines 11 things to help keep your car running smoothly.



Buying or Selling Your Vehicle in Pennsylvania

PennDOT provides a [fact sheet](#) that informs Pennsylvania residents of the proper procedures when buying or selling a vehicle in Pennsylvania.



Public Transportation

Pennsylvania offers public transportation in every county. You can learn more about public transportation by visiting this [website](#). To find transportation services near you, click [here](#).



Public Transportation Safety

PennDOT provides a [list](#) of public transportation safety and etiquette tips when traveling.



Ridesharing Services

Rideshare apps such as [Uber](#) and [Lyft](#) have become popular and convenient transportation options. However, safety is a growing concern. It's important to be aware of the safety features available to riders. These include the ability to share your trip with friends or family, a button to call the police, GPS tracking, audio recording features, and code verification to confirm the car. You can learn more about a rideshare safety guide [here](#).

Advocacy Tips!

- ✓ CASA volunteers can use the resources provided above to better support young people who are uncertain about obtaining car insurance, vehicle registration, maintenance tips, or accessing public transportation.
- ✓ Some counties offer savings match programs to help young people by providing matched savings. Our Emerging Leader Fellows have shared that these programs helped them purchase their first car. CASA volunteers can encourage those they work with to check if these programs are available in their independent living program, as it could be an opportunity to save for a car.

Access to Vital Documents

Another significant barrier to youth and young adults obtaining employment is the need to secure their vital documents, such as a birth certificate, Social Security card, and identification cards. It is common for young individuals to lack proper identification for a variety of reasons, including not having a safe place to store it, the costs associated with obtaining the documents, verification challenges, and unclear processes. This presents challenges, such as difficulty accessing services, confirming their identity, and enrolling in education and employment.



Pennsylvania Identification Card

If you or someone you know needs help obtaining a Pennsylvania ID card, visit this [link](#) to get started.

- [Application](#) for Initial Photo ID
- Is [REAL ID](#) right for me?



Birth Certificate

If you or someone you know needs help obtaining a Birth Certificate, visit this [link](#) to get started. If you were born outside of Pennsylvania in another state, you will visit the [National Center for Health Statistics](#) for more information.

- If a young person does not have all the information requested in the application, you can visit this [link](#) to learn about the options available.



Social Security Card

If you or someone you know needs help obtaining a Social Security card, visit this [link](#) to get started. You will find information to navigate the following:

- Replacement of card
- Request for a number for the first time
- Reporting of a stolen number
- Update your personal information on the record



Drivers License

If you or someone you know needs help obtaining a Driver's License, visit this [link](#) to get started. To prepare for a driver's test, you can access the [PA Drivers's Manual](#).

Advocacy Tips!

- ✓ Child welfare agencies are required by law to provide youth who leave the child welfare system at age 18 or older the original or certified copy of the following documents: birth certificate, Social Security card, state identification card or driver's license, health insurance information, medical records, education records, and a credit report.²¹ You can learn more about the rights of youth in foster care obtaining their vital documents [here](#).
- ✓ After leaving foster care, individuals are often required to provide documentation verifying their duration in the foster care system. Young people should also request and secure this documentation before leaving foster care.
- ✓ CASA volunteers can play a crucial role in educating youth about the significance of these documents and how to store them responsibly.

Employment Resources

Older youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood need assistance and resources to find and keep jobs as they navigate this critical phase. Employment enables individuals to achieve financial autonomy, decreasing the likelihood of poverty and homelessness. By accessing job opportunities, young adults can work towards economic mobility.

PA CareerLink®

Pennsylvania CareerLink® was developed as part of the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry initiative to assist individuals seeking career and training opportunities. This program can serve as a vital resource for older youth transitioning out of foster care by offering job search assistance, career counseling, training programs, and access to educational resources. Its comprehensive support can empower these individuals with the skills and opportunities needed to successfully navigate the transition to independent adulthood. The availability of services in Pennsylvania varies depending on the county.



SkillUp™ PA

This resource provides PA residents with free online job skills training. Interested individuals can access courses on the Metrix Learning Portal by registering for a free account on the PA CareerLink® website. View a flyer [here](#).



Job Corps

A career training program that offers tools to succeed in employment and education. There are job corp centers in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.



Youth Build

A community-based program that provides job training and educational services for youth ages 16-24. There are locations in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Allentown, Garfield, Johnstown, York, and Knox.



Job Finding Assistance

This resource links individuals to job training and skills development opportunities based on their location in Pennsylvania.

Housing

Every young person deserves safe, stable housing for healthy development, but those with experience in foster care often face housing instability. Over a third of foster youth experience more than two placements annually, impacting emotional well-being, access to healthcare, and an interruption in their education.²² This underscores the importance of ensuring young people are connected to resources and supports when exiting the foster care system to prevent homelessness.

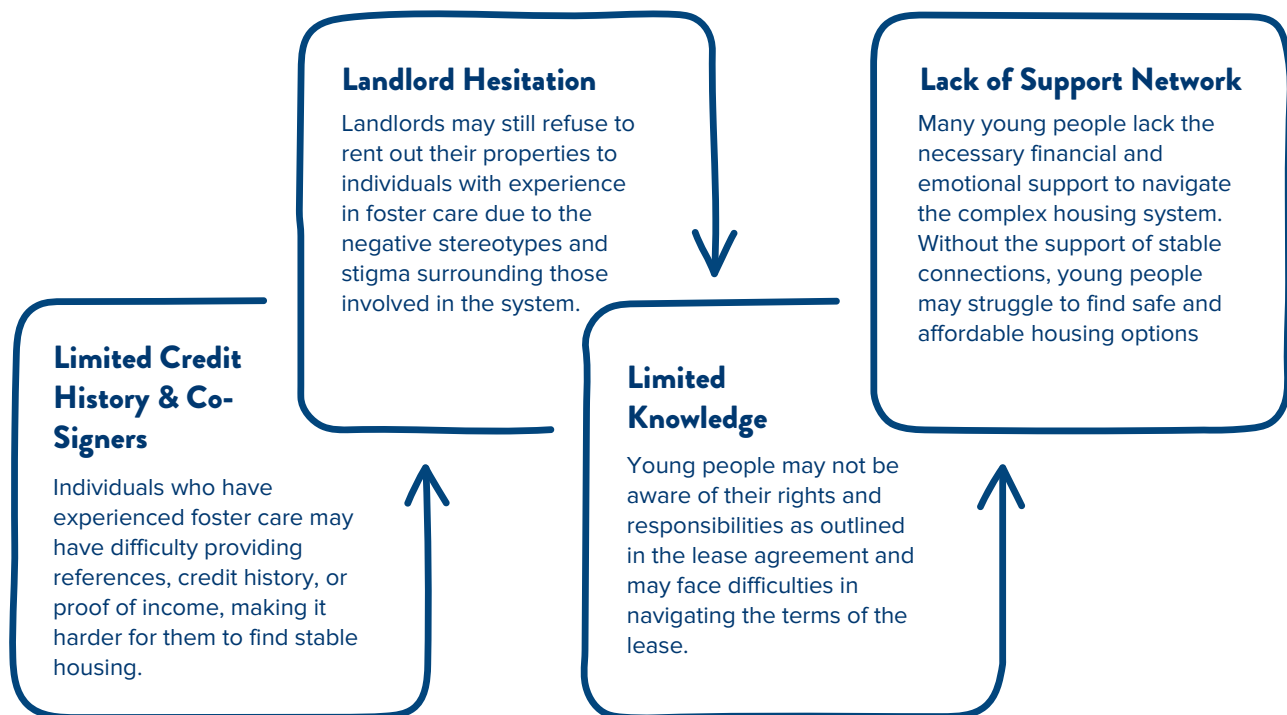
Did you know?

40% of youth aging out experience housing instability within two years of leaving foster care.²³

Between **24% and 33%** of homeless youth had a history of involvement in the foster care system.²⁴

Navigating the Housing System:

When young people transition out of the foster care system, they face a number of challenges as they begin to navigate the complexities of the services available to them and limitations in available resources.



Housing Resources in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania offers housing assistance and resources to support youth transitioning out of foster care to prevent homelessness.



Youth Shelters

PA 211 — This [site](#) offers 54 current shelters and housing programs for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania.



PA County Housing Authorities

PA Housing Authorities provide housing and information about housing programs. This [link](#) provides a contact list of all Public Housing Authorities in Pennsylvania.



PA Housing Search

This [search tool](#) assists individuals looking for housing. You can filter it based on amount, area, accessibility, and access to public transportation.



Finding Your Way in PA

This [resource](#) is a Pennsylvania-based mobile/desktop app designed to provide local services, resources, and information for young people and families experiencing housing instability.



Resources for Renting Your First Apartment

- This [checklist](#) helps prepare first-time renters.
- This [webpage](#) provides a guide to setting up utilities for a new apartment.
- This [resource](#) explains renters insurance and outlines what it covers.
- This [sample lease](#) agreement serves as a valuable tool for understanding tenant and landlord responsibilities.
- This [guide](#) provides an outline of renter rights and sample letters for Pennsylvania.

Health and Wellbeing

Youth transitioning out of foster care often face significant health challenges as they navigate the complexities of adulthood without the support structures typically available to their peers. Young adults who have had experience in foster care face higher rates of physical and mental health issues, including chronic conditions, substance abuse, and mental health disorders, often exacerbated by the trauma and instability they may have experienced while in foster care. Having access to medical care and frequent check-ups and screenings allows young adults who are aging out to navigate the healthcare system independently.

Within this section, additional information and resources will be provided in the following areas of health and well-being:

Oral Health



Effective oral hygiene habits, regular dental check-ups, and prompt treatment of oral issues are integral to preserving not only the health of the mouth, but also supporting systemic health throughout the body. Children and teenagers in foster care face difficulties in accessing dental and oral health care services. This lack of access can lead to an increased risk of oral health problems.

Physical Health



Maintaining good physical health is crucial for leading a happy and fulfilling life. Prioritizing physical health not only promotes resilience but also empowers these young adults to pursue their goals and navigate the challenges of adulthood with greater confidence.

Mental & Behavioral Health



Mental health plays a crucial role in the successful transition of youth out of foster care, as it impacts their ability to thrive independently. Prioritizing mental health not only promotes resilience but also empowers these young adults to pursue their goals and navigate the challenges of adulthood with greater confidence.

Reproductive Health



Addressing reproductive health needs is vital for youth transitioning out of foster care to empower them with knowledge and resources to make informed decisions about their bodies and futures while also promoting healthy relationships as they navigate adulthood.

Oral Health

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children and teenagers in foster care face difficulties in accessing dental and oral healthcare services.²⁵ This lack of access can lead to an increased risk of oral health problems. Studies have shown that children in foster care have greater rates of dental issues, and approximately one-third of children and youth in care have not received dental treatment within the past year.²⁶ It is important to prioritize children and youth's dental health in foster care and ensure they receive the necessary treatments and preventative care to maintain good oral health.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends routine dental health check-ups once every six months.²⁷ Refer to the following questions to support youth in understanding the importance of good oral health care as they prepare to transition from foster care:

- ✓ Is the youth connected to a dentist?
- ✓ Does the youth have a copy of their dental records?
- ✓ Does the youth practice good dental cleaning habits?
- ✓ Does the youth have insurance coverage?
- ✓ Does the youth understand copays and out-of-pocket expenses?

Accessing Dental Care in PA:

The PA Coalition for Oral Health (PCOH) is committed to improving oral health for all Pennsylvanians, including providing resources to increase access to dental care services. This [list](#) identifies the various avenues in which dental care can be found to meet a variety of needs, including for anyone experiencing financial hardships or a lack of insurance.

- ▶ **Dental Hygiene Program Clinics** may provide dental services at a low or reduced cost to anyone. Visit this [link](#) to identify if you live nearby a clinic.
- ▶ **PA Navigate** can connect individuals with community-based dental care resources, in addition to other supports such as food, shelter and transportation. For more information, visit this [link](#).
- ▶ **PA 211** is a United Way service that provides information and referrals to programs, including dental care. Visit this [link](#) to locate nearby dental providers.

Physical Health

When children and youth are placed in foster care, they often lack access to proper healthcare before entering the system. This leads to them having a high rate of undiagnosed or untreated chronic medical conditions.²⁸ The foster care system adds additional barriers to receiving necessary care, such as instability, lack of insurance and healthcare providers, lack of knowledge, discrimination, and privacy concerns.

Children in foster care are significantly more likely to have developmental delays, asthma, obesity, speech, hearing, and vision problems, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, behavioral problems, depression, and other health and mental health issues.²⁹ In fact, research indicates that between **30-80 percent** of foster youth have at least one chronic medical condition, and approximately **25 percent** have more than three chronic illnesses.³⁰ These statistics are alarming and highlight the urgent need for better healthcare services for children in foster care. Youth transitioning out of foster care need to be equipped with the necessary tools and information to navigate the healthcare system independently, including access to medical care, frequent check-ups, and screenings.

Accessing Health Care in PA:

- ▶ **PA Navigate** can connect individuals with health-related resources such as health education, medical care providers, community support services, and assistance with health-related costs. For more information, visit this [link](#).
- ▶ **PA 211** is a United Way service that provides information and referrals to programs, including health insurance, health education, screenings, and search-specific health needs. Visit this [link](#) to locate nearby providers.
- ▶ **PA Community Health Centers (CHC)** provide affordable, quality care. PACHC is the largest network of primary health care providers in the Commonwealth. Visit this [link](#) to locate nearby providers.
- ▶ **FindHelp** provides free or reduced-cost resources such as food, housing, financial assistance, health care, transportation, and legal services. Visit this [link](#) to find resources near you.

"I want other young people to know that sometimes when the system fails, you have to advocate for yourself. Inadequate access to medical care posed several challenges for me, such as not having transportation to appointments, foster parents and staff not listening to my concerns, and being ignored and told that it was all in my head. After years of being ignored, I was relieved when I was finally told what was going on, and my concerns were validated. No young person should experience this. "

-PA CASA Emerging Leader Fellow

Healthcare Advocacy Training

In Pennsylvania, CASA volunteers play a pivotal role in enhancing the health well-being of children in foster care. Notably, CASA volunteers currently stand as the sole members of the child welfare team who possess unrestricted access to a child's complete record, encompassing even their medical information. This unparalleled level of access, granted by 42 Pa. C.S. §6342(d)(1), is so extraordinary that it garnered repeated mention in Pennsylvania's Auditor General's State of Child Welfare report, released on September 14, 2017.

The unique position held by CASA volunteers enables them to furnish vital insights to the court regarding a child's healthcare needs. Their unparalleled access to medical records equips them to advocate effectively for children involved in dependency cases, setting them apart from other professionals in the child welfare system.

To support CASA volunteers in this area of advocacy, there are three available training courses on PA CASA's Learning Management System.

1

Healthcare Advocacy

This course is designed to build upon the skills of a CASA volunteer learned in pre-service training. Competencies developed during the pre-service training will be reviewed and new information will be presented. While there are many components to child well-being and health, the focus of this training is narrow in order to give the important components of this training the time and attention they need.

2

Advocating for Health Equity: Addressing LGBTQ+ Health Disparities in the Child Welfare System

This course focuses on addressing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) health disparities. It builds upon information shared in the Healthcare Advocacy course. This course is an introduction on how to advocate as a CASA volunteer for the children you serve, who may identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

3

Advocating for Health Equity: Addressing Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities in the Child Welfare System

This course will explore the role that racism plays in contributing to health disparities. It is important to note that while this course will touch upon the history of racism as it relates to health disparities, it is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of the history of racism. The information presented will help us understand the impact of racism on health outcomes and explore ways to address these disparities.

Get started!

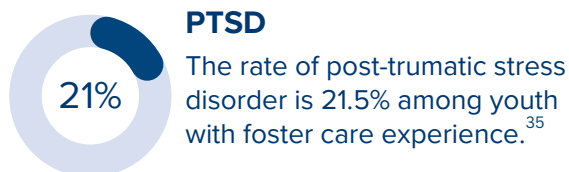
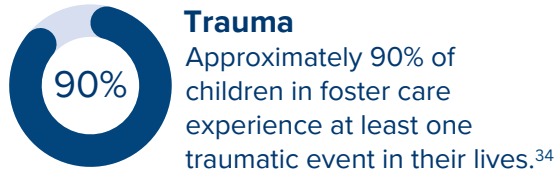
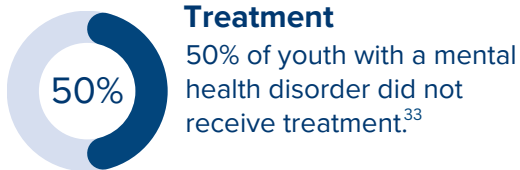
Visit CASA College: <https://pacasa.org/enroll>. If you do not have an Engage account, you will be prompted to create one. If you have an account, please sign in.

Available courses will be displayed on the CASA College page. To learn more about a course, click the "see more" button. You will be taken to an overview that shares more about the course. When you are ready to get started with a course, click "start course."

Mental and Behavioral Health

Children and youth who experience time in the foster care system often face a range of mental and behavioral health challenges. One of the most significant unmet needs for young people is the need for adequate mental and emotional support.³¹ When children and youth are removed from their caregivers and placed in foster care, they often experience significant emotional trauma. This trauma can be exacerbated by the ongoing separation, instability, court processes, lack of connections, and uncertainty that are inherent to the foster care experience. At least **80 percent** of young people in foster care encounter significant mental health difficulties.³² Children and youth in foster care must receive the mental and behavioral health support they need to overcome the challenges they face.

Did you know?



Between
27% and 47%
of youth in foster care ages 11 to 17 use psychotropic medications, with the rate increasing the longer they are in care.³⁶

According to data from the National Youth in Transition Database,
27%
of 17-year-olds in foster care had been referred for substance use treatment.³⁷

Advocacy Tip!

- ✓ CASA volunteers can learn more about youth rights in foster care, including access to treatment, care, and consent to treatment [here](#).

Key Concepts in Trauma & Youth Development

- ▶ **Trauma-Informed Care (TIC):** “Trauma-informed care understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize.”³⁸
- ▶ **Healing Centered Engagement (HCE):** “A healing centered approach to addressing trauma requires a different question that moves beyond “what happened to you” to “what’s right with you” and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events.”³⁹
- ▶ **Positive Youth Development (PYD):** “Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people’s strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.”⁴⁰
- ▶ **Resilience:** “Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.”⁴¹
- ▶ **Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG):** “Post-traumatic growth is the positive psychological change that some individuals experience after a life crisis or traumatic event. Post-traumatic growth doesn’t deny deep distress, but rather posits that adversity can unintentionally yield changes in understanding oneself, others, and the world.”⁴²

Want to learn more about becoming a trauma-informed advocate?

- ✓ Visit CASA College: <https://pacasa.org/enroll> and select “Trauma-informed Advocacy” to complete the self-paced course on PA CASA’s Learning Management System. If you do not have an Engage account, you will be prompted to create one. If you have an account, please sign in.

Mental, Behavioral, and Substance Use Resources

Psychology Today

This [website](#) lists clinical professionals, psychiatrists, and treatment centers that provide mental health services. You can filter by location, insurance, type of service, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion.

SAMHSA'S Tool

This [tool](#) is a confidential and anonymous resource for locating treatment facilities for mental and substance use disorders. You can filter by location, types of services, service settings, and treatment approaches.

Medicaid Providers

If a young person is covered by Medicaid in PA, they can locate an in-network provider by clicking on the Behavioral Health Managed Care Organization (BH-MCO) listed for your county [here](#).

Grief Support

This [webpage](#) helps locate grief therapists in your area.

Therapy for Black Girls Search Tool

This tool is an online [space](#) dedicated to encouraging the mental wellness of Black women and girls.

Black Mental Health Alliance

This resource provides culturally relevant educational forums, training, and referral services that support the health and well-being of Black people and their communities. To learn more, click [here](#).

The Trevor Project

The leading suicide prevention and crisis intervention [nonprofit organization](#) for LGBTQ+ young people. Individuals can connect to a [crisis counselor](#) 24/7, 365 days a year, from anywhere in the U.S. via text, chat, or phone. Plus, it is free and confidential.

LGBTQ National Help Center

This [center](#) provides free and confidential peer support, information, and local resources through national hotlines and online programs.

LGBTQ+ Centers in Pennsylvania

You can find a list of LGBTQ+ centers in PA [here](#).

988 Suicide Crisis & Safe Lifeline

To learn more about the national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress, click [here](#).

Advocacy Tip!

- ✓ CASA volunteers can utilize the resources provided to effectively support young people seeking mental and behavioral health services and ensure their needs are met.

Reproductive Health

According to recent research, foster youth who are in transition are more vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health risks, such as unintended pregnancy or paternity and sexually transmitted infections, compared to their peers in the general population.⁴³ In fact, the rate of pregnancy among transition-age foster youth is at **least twice as high** as the rate observed in the general population.⁴⁴ It is important that young people, especially those in the foster care system, have access to comprehensive and safe reproductive health services.

Reproductive Health Resources:

How Do You Prevent Sexually Transmitted Diseases

- A one-page document that outlines ways to minimize the risk of STDs. Read more [here](#).

SafeTeens.Org

- A [resource](#) for health information and your direct link to Reproductive Health Centers located throughout Pennsylvania

Statewide Listing of STD Clinics


- A comprehensive [list](#) of STD clinics in Pennsylvania, organized by county.

Planned Parenthood

- A [non-profit](#) organization that provides comprehensive reproductive health care and education to individuals of all ages and backgrounds. There are over 30 health centers in Pennsylvania!

LGBTQ+ Healthcare Directory

- A [database](#) of healthcare providers familiar with the unique health needs of LGBTQ+ individuals.



Knowledge is power!

“Many of us do not receive information about reproductive health despite the assumption that parents or schools educate us on this topic.”

-PA CASA Emerging Leader Fellow

Pregnant and Parenting Youth

Youth who have experienced foster care are more likely to become teenage parents than those who have not. Research shows that 1 in 10 reported becoming a parent between the ages of 17 and 19, while nearly 1 in 4 said they became parents between the ages of 19 and 21.⁴⁵ Given the challenges that come with being a young parent, it is crucial for them to have access to strong support networks and resources.

Pregnant and parenting youth are:⁴⁶

- Less likely to graduate from high school
- Less likely to receive adequate health care
- More likely to have mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety
- More likely to smoke, have inadequate nutrition, and deliver babies with low birth weight

Additional Supports & Resources:

Planned Parenthood is a [non-profit organization](#) that provides free or low-cost comprehensive reproductive health care and education to individuals of all ages and backgrounds. [Locate](#) a center near you.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is dedicated to helping low-income families become independent. The TANF program provides money to help pregnant women, dependent children, and their parents who live with them, as well as dependent children or other relatives who live with them and care for them. To learn more about TANF, visit [here](#).

Head Start & Early Head Start — Head Start is a federally funded program that offers education, health, and social services to families with children aged 3-5, available in every county in Pennsylvania. Early Head Start serves pregnant women and families with children from birth to age 3. PA Early Head Start is a provider of early childhood education services with eight locations across the state. Find more information [here](#), or locate a program near you [here](#).

What to Expect is a [website](#) that serves as an online resource hub for pregnancy information. You can find a due date calculator, a week-by-week pregnancy guide, details on fetal development, and information on pregnancy symptoms. It provides guidance on postpartum recovery, newborn care, and toddler growth, as well as recommendations for pregnancy-related products and family planning.

Young United Parents is a [website](#) offering a stigma-free environment for young parents to connect with and learn from a community of peers. It has several videos and articles available on various parenting topics.

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse is a [resource](#) for fathers and non-birthing parents providing information on strong families, healthy relationships, child support, custody, visitation, personal resilience, ways to support your child in school, and more.

National Parent Mental Health is a 24/7 [hotline](#) offering free, confidential support to new and expecting parents experiencing mental health challenges.

Advocacy Tips!

- ✓ CASA volunteers can use the resources provided above to support expecting and parenting youth.
- ✓ CASA volunteers can learn more about the rights of expectant and parenting youth [here](#).

Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation

The 2014 Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act was put in place to prevent and address the sex trafficking of children in foster care.⁴⁷ Young people who are placed in foster care are at a greater risk of experiencing trafficking and sexual exploitation.⁴⁸ It's difficult to estimate the numbers. However, various studies indicate a strong link between the two. For example, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports that in 2021, roughly **19 percent** of the children reported missing from foster care were estimated to have experienced sex trafficking.⁴⁹ According to the Field Center, traffickers are known to focus on children who are in foster care or have run away from it, using psychological manipulation and financial incentives.⁵⁰ Human traffickers can be anyone - family members, colleagues, neighbors, officials, community leaders, or even strangers.⁵¹

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), as amended (22 U.S.C. 7102), defines “severe forms of trafficking in persons” as follows: ⁵²

Sex Trafficking

The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.

Labor Trafficking

The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Did you know?

LGBTQ+ youth and youth who have been in foster care experience trafficking at **higher rates** than other youth.⁵³

Additional Supports & Resources:

- ▶ [Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies](#)
- ▶ [Definitions of Human Trafficking](#)
- ▶ [Federal Survey of Youth Currently and Formerly in Foster Care at Risk for Human Trafficking: Report 2022](#)

Advocacy Tip!

- ✓ CASA volunteers can access information about training, tools, and laws in Pennsylvania by clicking [here](#).

Polaris offers an interactive, [online training program](#) that includes six short modules, survivor stories, and quizzes designed to deepen your understanding of human trafficking. Training participants will receive a certificate of completion.

Health Insurance for Former Foster Youth

In 2014, the [Affordable Care Act \(ACA\)](#) made Medicaid/Medical Assistance available to former foster youth until the age of 26 to ensure continuous healthcare during their transition out of foster care.⁵⁴

To qualify, the individual must:

- Have been in foster care on or after their 18th birthday
- Reside in Pennsylvania
- Be under the age of 26

1

Does the youth need to fill out an application when they are discharged from foster care at the age of 18?

No, there are processes in place to ensure automatic enrollment upon discharge. However, make sure the youth speaks with their caseworker to ensure they continue to receive health insurance with no break in coverage.

2

How often does the youth have to renew their application?

To continue receiving assistance, they must complete a renewal application each year. They will receive a letter in the mail reminding them about this. They can learn more and renew their application at www.compass.state.pa.us.

Income does not impact eligibility.

3

Who isn't eligible?

Two groups who are ineligible for assistance include:

1. Individuals who left foster care before the age of 18
2. Individuals who did not receive medical assistance while in foster care

Advocacy Tips!

- ✓ CASA volunteers can visit this [resource guide](#) created by the Juvenile Law Center to learn more about medical assistance and see if a young person you are working with is eligible. You can also walk through this [flyer](#) with them, which ensures they have information about healthcare coverage.
- ✓ If you have any questions or know someone who wants to apply, they can apply online through [COMPASS](#) or call the PA Consumer Service Center at 1-866-550-4355.

Nutritional Assistance Programs

Youth who age out of foster care are at greater risk of food insecurity.⁵⁵ Nutritional assistance programs offer vital support to former foster youth and youth transitioning out of care by providing them with access to nutritious food, promoting their overall well-being as they navigate independent living. These programs can help alleviate food insecurity and contribute to their long-term health and success. Click on the following links to view a list of nutrition [infographics](#) and healthy eating [resources](#).



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP has a strong potential to support former foster youth. Eligible low-income families and individuals receive monthly nutrition benefits to purchase food from authorized retailers.

To learn more about SNAP, visit this [link](#).

How does someone apply for benefits?

Individuals can apply for assistance online at the COMPASS website, at their county assistance office, mail a paper application, or call 1-866-550-4355.

To apply for benefits, visit this [link](#).

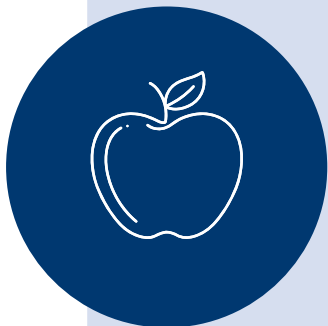


The PA Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

WIC offers nutrition education, breastfeeding guidance, and counseling alongside vouchers for purchasing healthy foods at grocery stores. It serves pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers for up to a year postpartum, non-breastfeeding mothers for up to six months postpartum, as well as infants and children under five years old, including foster children.

How does someone apply?

Individuals can either call the toll-free WIC Hotline at 1-800-WIC-WINS to speak with the WIC office staff and schedule their appointment or begin the process online by visiting this [link](#). Upon scheduling the appointment, it's important to review the [checklist](#) of items needed for their first visit to the WIC office. You can use this [tool](#) to see if you are eligible.



Local Food Banks in Pennsylvania

Individuals in need of food assistance can find a local food bank or pantry in a nearby area by visiting this [link](#).

Some food pantries may have certain requirements in order to receive food, such as living within a certain area. Usually volunteers will be present to assist individuals visiting. Some pantries may require a form to be completed initially to ensure adequate food assistance is provided and individuals are connected with other relevant programs.

Independent Living Services

Independent Living Services are programs that support individuals ages 14-21 who are in foster care and prepare for the transition to adulthood. These programs are operated statewide, and all county agencies are required to provide services to youth in their custody. These programs can be offered through a County Children and Youth Agency or contracted by a private provider.⁵⁶

Advocacy Tip!

- ✓ According to Pennsylvania law, a court cannot discharge a young person unless they have a transition/discharge plan in place that ensures they are on a pathway to success. This plan must include specific topics, including housing, income, education and training goals, employment, health insurance, health or behavioral health needs, vital documents, and proof of former foster care status. This should begin at age 14. You can learn more [here](#).⁵⁷

Independent Living Services

Obtaining a High School Diploma

Career Exploration & Training

Job Placement & Retention

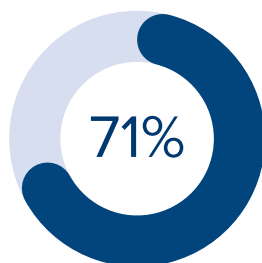
Training in Daily Living Skills

Budgeting & Financial Management

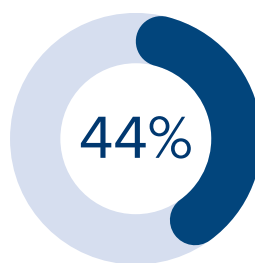
Substance Abuse Prevention

Preventative Health Activities

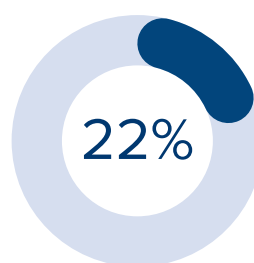
Transition services, including vocational training and housing assistance, are intended to support young people in foster care. However, the level of involvement in transition services is currently low. Only **51 percent** of Pennsylvania's foster care population received a service between ages 14 and 21. It's important to raise awareness about these resources to ensure that young people in foster care are connected to them.⁵⁸



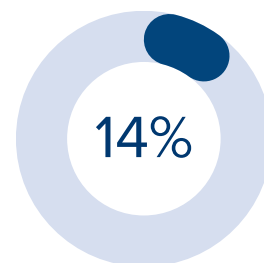
Utilized life skills training



Utilized academic support



Participated in educational / vocational training



Utilized room and board

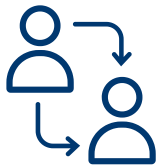
Essential Knowledge and Resources



Foster Youth Rights

It's essential for young people in foster care to be aware of their rights so that they can confidently advocate for themselves and ensure they receive the support and resources they are entitled to.

- You can view the Know Your Rights Guide presented by the Juvenile Law Center [here](#).
- You can view the website version of the Know Your Rights Guide [here](#).



Mentoring

Fostering healthy and supportive relationships during childhood and adolescence is critical to an individual's success and well-being in adulthood. It's important to ensure that young people are aware of the activities that are available to them in their community.

- You can learn more about the importance of mentoring for youth in foster care [here](#).
- You can find a mentor or a program near you [here](#).



Money Management

Financial literacy is essential for youth as it equips them with the skills needed to manage their finances and make informed decisions.

- You can learn more about money management tools [here](#).
- You can view a list of resources about credit history, taxes, credit, and safety [here](#).

Additional Resources

- [A Brief Guide to Caring for Black & Brown Hair](#) - The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board created this guide as a resource intended to assist families, workers, and even youth in caring for and protecting their crowns.
- [Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care](#) - This tip sheet provides a roadmap for a safer social media experience.
- [Loveisrespect](#) - Provides 24/7 support and help to teens in an unhealthy or unsafe dating relationship, including a free and confidential helpline, an anonymous online chat with a peer advocate, and a text chat. The website also contains resources on dating and dating safety.
- [Wellness Applications](#) - This list includes a variety of free applications designed to promote wellness. These apps cover a range of wellness-related activities, such as mental health support, physical activity tracking, art activities, meditation guidance, and habit tracking.

Extended Foster Care

Pennsylvania now continues to support youth until they reach the age of 21, whereas it used to end at age 18. Pennsylvania provides extended foster care services to support young adults facing challenges during their transition into adulthood. Extended foster care is designed for young people who leave foster care within 90 days of turning 18 or after 18 and can continue to receive foster care services until they turn 21. If a young person is in extended foster care, the child welfare agency provides them with placement and services. Youth will still have a caseworker and a lawyer, and they will continue to attend court hearings.

In addition to meeting the age-out requirement, those who choose to participate in extended foster care must also meet one of the requirements below:

- Completing secondary education or an equivalent credential;
- Enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education;
- Participating in a program actively designed to promote or remove barriers to employment;
- Employed for at least 80 hours per month; or
- Are incapable of doing any of the activities described above due to a medical or behavioral health condition, which is supported by regularly updated information in the child's permanency plan.⁵⁹

If a young person chooses to participate in extended foster care, they will be provided with a place to live, health insurance, medical and mental health treatment, and support from professionals. They will also have court reviews of their case and can communicate with their lawyer and the judge. In extended foster care, they will continue to receive support services while also having the opportunity to receive more autonomy and responsibility.⁶⁰

Research shows that young people in care benefit from support during their transition into adulthood. Studies have found that older youth who stay in extended foster care until the ages of 19 and 21 have a higher chance of achieving positive outcomes as adults compared to those who leave care before these ages.⁶¹

Advocacy Tip!

If a young person decides to leave foster care, they have the option to return. To re-enter, the youth must have aged out at 17 years and nine months or older, be under 21 years old, and meet one of the requirements mentioned above. You can learn more about extended foster care [here](#).



3x more likely to be enrolled in school

1.4x more likely to be receiving educational aid

3x less likely to be disconnected from school and work

Aftercare Services in Pennsylvania

Aftercare services are available to any youth who exited foster care on or after their 14th birthday and before their 23rd birthday. While aftercare services do provide support to address gaps and problems the youth may be experiencing, they do not offer as much comprehensive support as extended foster care up to the age of 21.

Youth must meet one of the requirements below to be eligible to benefit from aftercare services:

- Experience foster care at age 14 or older
- Exited foster care at age 18 or extended foster care up to age 21
- Exited foster care through adoption or legal guardian after attaining the age of 16
- Exited foster care through reunification at age 14 or older

In Pennsylvania, aftercare services were created to reduce the negative outcomes associated with leaving foster care at the age of 18 or 21. This allows specific services to be extended to young adults through the age of 23. Youth who left the child welfare system at age 18 or older can receive support with stipends and room and board.⁶²

Examples of Aftercare Services Include:⁶³

- Help in obtaining a high school diploma
- Assistance in finding and applying to colleges
- Career exploration, including support in securing and maintaining employment
- Training opportunities, including developing daily living skills, budgeting, and financial management
- Assistance in finding a place to live
- Support through mentoring programs and other community-based services

Advocacy Tips!

- ✓ County child welfare agencies are required to offer aftercare services. It is important to understand that these services are not mandatory for youth. However, they can be beneficial for a young person about to transition out of foster care. If someone you know is interested in learning more about these services to determine eligibility, you can access IL services and contacts by visiting [The County Children and Youth Directory](#). Using the drop-down arrows, select "county children and youth agencies" to filter your search.
- ✓ CASA volunteers can learn more about the differences between extended foster care and aftercare services by clicking [here](#).



Authentic Youth Engagement

There is a growing emphasis on the importance of involving individuals with lived experience in conversations about their lives. By implementing the voices of those with lived experience, we can better understand their challenges and the most effective ways to support them. This approach allows us to provide more personalized support that addresses the unique needs of the children, youth, and families we serve.

The Emerging Leader Fellows acknowledged the significance of utilizing an Authentic Youth Engagement Model. This model goes beyond our traditional approach of treating young people as recipients of services, instead providing opportunities for them to lead and learn.⁶⁴ We know that older youth who have spent time in foster care are more likely to face challenging outcomes when they exit. Research has shown that youth engagement has been linked to significant improvements in academic achievements, behavior, and mental health, including reductions in substance use and risky behaviors.⁶⁵ Ensuring youth and young adults are included in their chosen pathway is essential for a successful transition.

Authentic engagement requires collaboration and partnerships. It is crucial to create an environment that promotes the participation of young people in decision-making processes and provides them with opportunities to develop their skills, interests, and talents.

Youth Engagement Resources:

- [Importance of Youth Engagement in Case Planning](#)
- [Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships](#)
- [The Rights of Youth in Foster Care and How Youth Can Get Their Voice Heard](#)
- [Positive Youth Development](#)

Advocacy Tip!

Encourage a young person that their value as an individual goes beyond their life experiences. Sharing their story can be healing, but it should always be their personal decision. It's important that they understand they have the right to decide how much they want to share about their experiences.

"Young people should be given the opportunity to actively participate in decision-making that affects their lives. This includes being involved in case planning as well as working alongside organizations and agencies to develop policies, practices, and programs. Those who are closest to the problem should be closest to the solution. Adult partners and young people can mutually learn from each other."

-PA CASA Impact Project Coordinator

Recommendations from Our Lived Experience Experts



Be Mindful of Language

It is important to be mindful of the language we use when communicating with young people and how it impacts them. For example, use language that uplifts and acknowledges their capabilities, is inclusive, affirms all identities, and avoids jargon.

Youth Perspective:

Young people shared that they remembered hearing individuals call them 'aggressive' or 'hard-headed.' They wish they were seen as more than just those labels—as a young person with real emotions and experiences. It's essential to understand the root causes of behaviors instead of dismissing young people with these negative terms.

A young person also shared their experience when someone assigned to their case spoke negatively about their biological mother, referring to her as an 'addict' and the 'hardest mother' to work with. This hurt their relationship. Despite the challenges faced by the mother, the individual still loved her, and hearing these labels made them feel angry. It would have been more meaningful if the person tried to understand the mother's situation instead of just judging her.



Encourage Youth to Engage Decision-Making

We recognize that young people and those who have been directly affected by the foster care system are often excluded from discussions that significantly impact their lives. As young people are in a stage of development where they need to learn important skills such as decision-making, critical thinking, and collaboration, it is important to include them in these discussions.

Youth Perspective:

When it comes to making decisions that affect the lives of young people, it's important to involve them in the decision-making process by asking about their preferences, aspirations, and goals. This approach ensures their engagement and empowers them to make informed decisions for themselves. Young people can find it challenging to make decisions independently when they are surrounded by people who have made decisions on their behalf. Let's work with youth instead of for them. Let's ask the youth rather than tell them.



Connect Youth to Resources

Young people may not be aware of the resources available to them, and even if they are, they may find them difficult to navigate. It can be challenging for them to access the resources. Individuals who work with them should be knowledgeable about the resources available in their communities and make sure that foster youth can easily access them.

Youth Perspective:

Understanding the resources available to young people was challenging. We recommend that anyone working with youth and young adults educate themselves about the resources available to youth in their community. One individual shared that having their CASA volunteer do a lot of research on resources made it clear that she was committed to providing her with as much support as possible.

We also recommend connecting youth and young adults to as many community networks, mentors, and chosen family members as possible. Young people should never leave foster care with less supportive adults than when they entered.



Lean Into Your Own Experiences

It's essential to take time to reflect on how your experiences influence your attitudes and methods of working with older youth in foster care. Everyone has experiences that shape who they are and how they interact with those around them. It is important to recognize and appreciate these differences and provide respectful and responsive support to each individual's experience and background.

Youth Perspective:

When young people were asked about the most impactful adults in their lives, they shared that they took the time to recognize and understand their differences. They believed this helped them advocate for them and connect them to resources that were responsive to their specific needs. We recommend practicing cultural humility and being open to learning about and respecting different cultures. This involves acknowledging one's own cultural background and biases and how we show up to spaces.



Build Trust

Building trust with the older youth you work with is essential in building a strong relationship. This involves consistency, open communication, follow-through, and check-ins. One of the difficulties young people in foster care face is establishing and maintaining relationships with adults due to the multiple individuals and interactions they encounter. In addition, the lack of secure relationships can make it challenging for these youth to develop trust.

Youth Perspective:

When young people experience time in foster care, they may not let many people into their lives and push people away to avoid getting hurt or disappointed. They described this as a self-protective behavior that made it challenging to form relationships and feel a sense of belonging. It's essential to provide support, be consistent, listen without judgment, and follow through with what you say you'll do.



Meet Youth Where They Are At

All young people have unique skills, needs, and experiences, and utilizing a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. It's important to meet youth where they are in their journey.

Youth Perspective:

Some young people may not prefer communicating via phone calls. To remove barriers, it may be helpful to consider alternative communication methods, like text messages, letters, or emails. In addition, being open to meeting outside traditional hours. Instead of visiting during school time or asking them to adjust their work schedule, you can offer to meet after work hours or on weekends to accommodate their commitments.

Hear What the Fellows Have to Say...

What are the key qualities and skills that caseworkers, mentors, and CASA volunteers should possess when working with older youth?

Value lived experience

Be understanding

Have patience

Be empathetic

Passionate

Financial help/budgeting

Use strengths-based language

Encouraging

Keep a positive attitude

Clear communication

Consistency

Reliability - Keep showing up

Be an active listener

Provide honest feedback

Respectful

Use a trauma-informed approach

Share cooking resources

Remain non-judgemental

Trusting

Help with navigating resources

Utilize healing-centered engagement

Meet youth where they are at in their journey

Advocacy Tip!

- ✓ These qualities and skills may look different for each young person. We recommend using these as conversation starters to define and adapt them to individual needs and situations.

Youth Advocacy Organizations

Pennsylvania

[Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board](#) | The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is comprised of current and former substitute care youth ages 16-21. Youth leaders on the YAB educate, advocate, and form partnerships to create positive change in the substitute care system.

[Pennsylvania's Advocates For Change](#) | Advocates 4 Change are individuals aged 16-25 who have lived experience, past or present, with housing instability, homelessness, involvement with youth-serving systems, and/or youth allies who are committed to ending youth homelessness.

[Youth MOVE Advisory Council](#) | The Youth Move Advisory Council is focused on maintaining authenticity regarding what youth and young adults actually want related to youth mental health and needs across Pennsylvania.

[Lancaster Youth Action Board](#) | Lancaster YAB's mission is to end youth and young adult homelessness through active listening, advocating, and engaging. Their approach is simple – echoing the voices of the unheard in the corridors of Lancaster County.. Their approach is simple – echoing the voices of the unheard in the corridors of Lancaster County.

National

[FosterClub](#) | FosterClub is a national network for young people in foster care that helps its members engage with and support one another. It was created for—and is driven by—young people who experience foster care. FosterClub's peer-delivered services for youth include camps, conferences, tip sheets and publications, online spaces to connect, and more. You can learn more about opportunities for youth with experience in foster care [here](#).

[National Foster Youth Institute](#) | The National Foster Youth Institute's mission is to transform the child welfare system by building a national grassroots movement led by foster youth and their families. You can learn more about opportunities for youth with experience in foster care [here](#).

[Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute](#) | CCAI is dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children around the world in need of permanent, safe, and nurturing families and to eliminating the barriers that hinder these children from realizing their basic right to a family. You can learn about internship opportunities for youth with foster care experience [here](#).

[Unbelievably Resilient](#) | Unbelievably Resilient is a non-profit organization composed of young adults who spend time in foster care. They aim to empower youth and alumni of foster care to reclaim their narratives by authentically sharing their stories of journeying from trauma to triumph.

[National Network for Youth](#) | The National Network for Youth (NN4Y) is dedicated to preventing and eradicating youth homelessness in America. You can learn more about advocacy opportunities for youth who have transitioned out of crisis intervention services, programs, and housing [here](#).

[SchoolHouse Connection](#) | SchoolHouse Connection is a national non-profit organization working to overcome homelessness through education. They provide strategic advocacy and practical assistance in partnership with early childhood programs, schools, institutions of higher education, service providers, families, and youth.

Helplines and Hotlines

Pennsylvania Helplines

Autism Services | 1-866-539-7689

Benefits Helpline (Cash Assistance, SNAP, MA etc.) | 1-800-692-7462

Children's Health Helpline | 1-800-986-KIDS

ChildLine (State Child Abuse Registry) | 1-800-932-0313

Disability Services | 1-866-286-3636

PA Consumer Service Center | 1-866-350-4355

Pennsylvania Children and Youth Serving Systems

Department of Education | 717-783-6788

Department of Public Welfare (DPW) | 1-800-692-7462

Office of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS) | 717-787-6443

Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency (PCCD) | 1-800-692-7292

National Hotlines

National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service | 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

National Domestic Violence Hotline | 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline | 1-800-273-8255

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) Helpline | 1-800-931-2237

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) HelpLine | 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline | 1-800-422-4453

Runaway Safeline | 1-800-RUNAWAY (786-2929)

Human Trafficking Hotline | 1-888-373-7888

Postpartum Depression | 1-800-773-6667

Trans Lifeline | 877-565-8860

The Trevor Project - Crisis intervention & suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth | 1-866-488-7386

LGBT National Youth Talkline | 800-246-7743

Youth America Hotline - Counseling for Teens by Teens | 1-877-968-8454

Older Youth Advocacy Assessment Checklist Overview

The Older Youth Advocacy Assessment Checklist is designed to assist CASA volunteers in supporting older youth develop skills for transitioning into adulthood and empower them to make informed decisions.

How to use:

1. Review and familiarize yourself with the six categories included on this assessment: Education, Employment, Housing, Health, Independent Living, and Advocacy and Support
2. Within each category, there are prompts to guide your discussion with the youth and indicate which items require further exploration.
3. Based on the information gathered, identify areas where the youth may require additional support, resources, or advocacy.
4. Refer to the completed checklist to develop an action plan to address the identified needs to support the youth in their transition to adulthood.

Older Youth Advocacy Assessment Checklist

This checklist aims to support CASA volunteers in guiding older youth as they transition into adulthood, equipping them with essential skills and empowering them to make informed choices. It serves as a tool for guiding information gathering efforts and identifying areas where the youth may need additional support. Your dedication and advocacy have the potential to significantly impact each youths' journey towards independence.

Education

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assess current education status | <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure access to copies of education records |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Identify future educational goals | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Determine barriers to achieving educational goals | <input type="checkbox"/> If planning to attend college/vocational school, assist in navigating financial aid and scholarship applications |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate access to academic support services | |

Employment

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review employment history | <input type="checkbox"/> Identify important documentation required for employment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assess job readiness skills | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Identify available employment support services | <input type="checkbox"/> Support the the development of a resume |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss career interests and goals | |

Housing

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate housing stability | <input type="checkbox"/> Provide information on legal rights regarding housing, especially pertaining to renting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Explore knowledge of housing options and financial assistance | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss concerns about housing instability | |

Older Youth Advocacy Assessment Checklist

Health

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure coverage by Medicaid or another insurance | <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure access to copies of health records |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review understanding of how to access health services / schedule appointments | <input type="checkbox"/> Review understanding of good hygiene and nutrition habits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss emotional well-being and access to mental health services | <input type="checkbox"/> Provide information on reproductive health to understand risks and options |

Independent Living

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate proficiency in life skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Assess if youth has or requires a valid driver's license |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assess ability to manage finances | <input type="checkbox"/> Review understanding of auto insurance and car maintenance, if applicable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure knowledge of how to access bank services | |

Advocacy and Support

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate self-advocacy skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Identify areas where additional support or advocacy may be needed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Identify support network | <input type="checkbox"/> Discover if youth is registered to vote or would like to be |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Develop list of contact information for community resources, independent living caseworkers, and mentors | |

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