

# CHAFEE PLUS TEN: A VISION FOR THE NEXT DECADE

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative



Ensuring that each youth in foster care has both permanent family connections and the life skills to make a successful transition to adulthood

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*On the tenth anniversary of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, this paper takes a close look at what has been learned since the law's enactment. The Chafee Act made significant improvements in the Independent Living Program. It made funds available to states to provide youth with the education, vocational and employment training necessary to obtain employment and/or prepare for post secondary education, training in daily living skills, substance abuse prevention, pregnancy prevention and preventive health activities. The law also recognized the needs of young people ages 18 to 21 who had left foster care, providing states with federal resources (to be matched with state dollars) and options to provide services for older youth who had left foster care but had not reached age 21, provide room and board for youth ages 18 to 21 who had left foster care, and extend Medicaid to 18, 19 and 20-year-olds who had emancipated from foster care. The Chafee Act offered states greater flexibility in designing their independent living programs and established accountability for states in implementing their independent living programs. The Act also required the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to develop outcomes measures to assess states' performance in serving youth.*

*Despite its many positive contributions, the Chafee Act continued the philosophy of the Independent Living Program by placing emphasis on making youth "independent" at an age when few young people in the United States have even the rudimentary skills to survive wholly on their own. It did not address the critical role of families in young adults' lives nor the basic support that families typically provide their young adult children well past the age of 18 or 21. The Act did not reference permanence as a critical outcome for youth in foster care. Further, the Act did not recognize the importance of providing young people with opportunities to build strong relationships with adults and peers, participate in structured activities, and develop a broad and diverse network of social support.*

*Over the past decade, the number of youth aging out of foster care each has year continued to grow. Since 1999, more than 230,000 young people have aged out of foster care. Research shows that the outcomes for the majority of these young people are poor. Studies have shown that young people who age out of foster care often suffer academically, have poor secondary school outcomes, face challenges in attending and completing college, are at risk of early pregnancy, and are at risk of arrest and incarceration. Studies also indicate that youth of color are disproportionately represented in this population of young people. A recent analysis has demonstrated that allowing young people to age out of foster care to live on their own also has a significant fiscal impact on society in term of educational outcomes, unplanned parenthood, and criminal justice system costs.*

*Over the past decade, the concept of "connected by 25" has come to guide the process of preparing young people to successfully transition to adulthood. Rather than unrealistically expecting 18 year olds to be fully independent, a "connected by 25" view sees the need for young people to have the support of family, education and training, opportunities to experience and ultimately select employment and career paths, social and civic engagement in the community, health care, and a web of supportive relationships. Many young people currently and formerly in foster care, lacking these supports, are at particular risk of failing to make a successful transition to adulthood.*

## What Have We Learned Since 1999?

Since 1999, the field of child welfare has learned much about what young people need to successfully transition to adulthood. Ten key lessons have emerged:

### 1) Permanence is vital for youth.

*The past decade has seen a focus on family permanence for youth, with increasing attention to the importance of family in youth's lives. States and localities have developed programs, practices and tools to support the achievement of family permanence for youth in care. Evaluations, including those conducted by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the evaluations of federally funded programs on youth permanence, have shown that having a permanent family relationship and feeling connected to an adult are key to the well-being of young people.*

### 2) Young people must be served from a youth development and developmentally appropriate perspective.

*Much has been learned since 1999 about the importance of providing services and supports for young people based on both their chronological age and developmental attainment. The understanding of adolescent brain development and its implications for young people's transitions to adulthood has greatly expanded. The concept of "emerging adulthood" has informed thinking about the gradual process by which young people achieve adulthood and has reinforced the critical role of family in supporting young people during the transition.*

### 3) Young people must be engaged in planning for their futures and advocacy.

*The Chafee Act mandated that states ensure that youth in independent living programs participate directly in designing their own services and supports. Since 1999, the engagement of youth in foster care in their own planning has emerged as a best practice. Agencies are implementing a variety of approaches to involving youth along a continuum of youth serving, youth input, youth engagement, and youth-led processes. The Pew Charitable Trusts' Kids are Waiting campaign, the National Governors Association Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning from Foster Care, and the implementation of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative strategy of youth engagement in jurisdictions across the country have provided a rich environment for learning how to support young people in becoming advocates for themselves and others.*

### 4) Independent living programs have not been successful in preparing young people in foster care for adulthood.

*Over the past decade, research has examined the quality of independent living programs and the outcomes they achieve. In general, programs have been found to be ineffective in meeting the needs of young people in the areas of education and employment, economic well-being, housing, delinquency, pregnancy, and receipt of needed documentation.*

### 5) Young people currently and formerly in foster care need to build financial resources and assets.

*With the growing appreciation of the complexities of the transition to adulthood for young people in the twenty-first century, more attention has focused on the need for financial resources and assets to support them through this process. The need is even more dramatic for young people currently or formerly in foster care because they lack the financial support that families often provide. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities has developed the Opportunity Passport™, a package of resources designed to help young people learn financial management; obtain experience with the banking system; save money for education, housing, health care, and other specified expenses; and gain streamlined access to educational, training and vocational opportunities. The accumulation of assets has been found to have important short- and long-term benefits for young people currently or formerly in foster care.*

**6) Data must be available to track outcomes and drive decisions in communities and states.**

*With the growing body of research on the poor outcomes for young people who age out of foster care, there has been a heightened focus on clearly and methodically tracking outcomes for young people. The Institute for Child and Family Policy at the University of Maine and the University of Kansas School of Social Work, among others, have developed a range of tools to assist states and communities develop data systems to track permanence, well-being and safety outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's research, evaluation, and communications strategy has focused on documenting results and identifying and disseminating evidence-based and promising practices. Among the lessons learned are that data must be collected and used to guide decision making, measure the degree to which outcomes for young people are improving, and develop the public will to support young people's successful transitions to adulthood.*

**7) Partnerships and resources are essential in achieving positive outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care.**

*The past decade has seen a new commitment to partnerships between child welfare agencies and other service systems, including physical health, mental health, substance abuse prevention and treatment and education, and between the public and private sectors. Experience suggests that young people currently and formerly in foster care have better outcomes when cross systems partnerships, supported by adequate resources, are in place. The Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services has focused on the financial resources that are needed to achieve and sustain youth permanence. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative brings together key local decision-makers and other people of influence who take responsibility for leveraging public and private resources that will provide increased opportunities for youth in foster care. Among the lessons learned are that partnerships are critical to success and that partners must have the ability to sustain change by influencing public policy, funding, and practices in child welfare, employment, education, housing, health and banking.*

**8) Public policy and public will are critical elements in effectively serving youth currently and formerly in foster care.**

*A number of initiatives and efforts have identified public policy and public will as critical to positive outcomes for young people in or formerly in foster care, including the California Blue Ribbon Commission, the National Foster Care Coalition, and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities' Initiative. The Initiative, for example, uses strategies to ensure that public and private systems are responsive and effective and that the public understands and supports the work involved in effectively serving youth in care. A key learning is that improving policies, practices and funding patterns of multiple systems is essential to helping young people transition successfully to adulthood.*

**9) Court involvement is crucial to achieving and monitoring positive outcomes for young people in foster care.**

*In the early 2000s, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care highlighted the role of courts in promoting positive outcomes for young people in foster care. Since that time, greater attention has focused on young people's active participation in their court proceedings. In addition, there has been a growing recognition of the role of courts in creating and enforcing deadlines for permanency planning and the provision of services to prepare young people for adulthood.*

**10) The leveraging of financing and ideas is key to positive outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care.**

*Over the past decade, the need to leverage financing and ideas has become more critical. The Forum for Youth Investment and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative have learned much about the critical role of leveraging in bringing about positive outcomes for youth as they transition to adulthood. With regard to financial leveraging, a clear lesson is the power of public dollars in serving young people in or leaving foster care. A second clear lesson is that the leveraging of ideas to influence thinking and practice is equally critical.*



## A Vision for the Next Decade

Building on the lessons learned over the past ten years, it is possible to construct a vision for the child welfare field for the next decade in which the needs of young people currently and formerly in foster care are fully met. The vision is that each young person currently or formerly in foster care successfully transitions to adulthood by age 25. “Connected by 25” represents a common yardstick that reflects the convergence of full brain development, completion of college and other postsecondary education, and connection to employment, further education, childrearing, and other pursuits that take place by age 25. Young adults who are connected by 25 have acquired the skills they need to participate in the labor force, establish their own households, and develop positive social networks for themselves. Young people currently or formerly in foster care are at particular risk of not being connected by 25.

In order to achieve the vision of “connected by 25” and effectively prepare young people currently or formerly in foster care for successful adulthood, two critical pieces must be in place: (1) a viable system for the delivery of services and supports that promotes the successful transitions of young people from foster care to adulthood; and (2) policies that fully implement the opportunities made available by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, and other federal and state laws.

**An Effective Service System:** To achieve the vision of “connected by 25” for each young person currently or formerly in foster care, a truly effective service system for young people will:

- Blend youth development, permanence and the provision of interdependent living services
- Base strengths and needs assessments on young people’s ability to build on and preserve positive, enduring, relationships and make successful transitions to adulthood
- Engage youth in formulating plans that include the goals they wish to achieve by age 25
- Fully utilize developmentally appropriate supports and interventions to produce better outcomes for young people
- Provide family centered and culturally competent casework and planning, engagement skills, strengths based approaches, and team decision making to achieve family permanence
- Provide child welfare social workers and supervisors with the training and supports they need to provide services effectively and consistently with the new vision
- Connect youth and families with community based support systems, including civic and faith-based organizations
- Develop community resources that support youth throughout their transitions to adulthood
- Collect and analyze data to assess service system efficacy and guide the development of new service delivery modalities

**Strong Policies that Support Youth in Successfully Transitioning to Adulthood:** Equally important to achieving the vision of “connected by 25” for each young person currently or formerly in foster care is the development and implementation of a range of policies that promote the successful transition of youth in foster care to adulthood. These policies will fully implement the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Specifically, with respect to the Fostering Connections Act, policy will ensure that young people have permanent family connections; ensure that youth receive preparation for adulthood services after they have left foster care to permanent families; allow youth to remain in foster care through age 21 with federal support; ensure careful planning of young people’s transitions from foster care; and ensure that youth in foster care achieve their educational goals and are physically and emotionally healthy.

Opportunities under other federal laws and states laws also will be maximized. Young people currently and formerly in foster care will receive financial and other supports for post-secondary education. These young people will have access to job training and ongoing support. Young people who leave foster care will have safe, affordable housing. At the state level, policies will support young people’s permanence, education, health, and other needs.

## Introduction

On the tenth anniversary of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, this paper takes a close look at what has been learned since the law's enactment. It examines how that knowledge can shape the work to be done in the next decade to ensure that each youth in foster care has both permanent family connections and the life skills to make a successful transition to adulthood. The paper first reviews the history of the Chafee Act and the provisions of the law, the research on the law's implementation, and the National Youth in Transition Database. It next provides a data snapshot of young people in the foster care system, reviews studies that have examined outcomes for youth aging out of foster care, and considers the cost to society when young people age out of foster care. The paper then describes what has been learned since 1999, beginning with the desired result of successful transitions to adulthood by age 25. It focuses on the developments in research, practice and policy over the past ten years. Throughout this discussion we look to the learnings from specific initiatives, programs and other efforts, including the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, that enrich and add to the research, practice and policy developments. The paper concludes with a vision for the next decade and the practice and policy framework that must support it.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (“the Initiative”) developed this paper to bring attention to what has been learned since the enactment of the Chafee Act and how those lessons can shape the vision for the next decade. The Initiative began in 2001 committed to the goal that every young person currently and formerly in foster care have access to the opportunities and support they need for a successful transition to adulthood. The Initiative’s mission is to bring together the people, resources, and public and private systems necessary to ensure that the young people who leave foster care are able to make successful transitions to adulthood by working with communities through grant making, technical assistance and advocating for improved policies and practices. It has worked in partnership with communities across the country to integrate key practices of youth voice, community partnerships, and the creation of a range of opportunities for young people into the core work of state child welfare agencies and other strategic allies. The Initiative measures success by improved outcomes in six areas: permanence, education, employment, housing, physical and mental health, and personal and community engagement.

Over the past nine years, the Initiative has learned much about how to successfully prepare young people currently or formerly in foster care for the transition to adulthood. Its work has coincided with the implementation of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Its collaborative work with communities across the country has brought to light the strengths and challenges of the Chafee Act within the context of sweeping changes both within and outside of the field of child welfare.

## The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999

In the 1980s, studies pointed to the extremely poor outcomes for young people in foster care, many of whom spent much of their youth moving from one foster home to another, never reuniting with their families or having new families through adoption or guardianship (Courtney, 2009). This research found that without support and training to prepare them for the challenges they would face as adults, young people were often unprepared for life after foster care and frequently encountered homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and pregnancy. In an effort to assist young people in foster care, Congress created the federal Independent Living Program in 1986, providing funds for services for young people age 16 and older who were or who had been in foster care to make the transition to adulthood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 1999). Independent Living Program funds, available to all states and the District of Columbia, were to be used for counseling, educational assistance, life-skills training, and vocational support.

In 1993, the Independent Living Program was permanently reauthorized and funded at a \$70 million fiscal year level over a five year period (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, 1993). The program gave states wide flexibility regarding the types of services that they provided to young people and required states to provide the federal government with independent living program plans, but little other information (Courtney, 2009). A General Accounting Office study found that in 1998 only about 60 percent of eligible young people received an independent living service (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998). Many, if not most, states used Independent Living Program dollars on classes at residential facilities. State and private agencies generally created programs that were intended to teach life skills, but which often lacked a connection to other supports that youth need.

## Enactment of The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999

In 1999, recognizing the limits of the Independent Living Program, Congress enacted and President Clinton signed into law The Foster Care Independence Act, increasing federal support to states for independent living programs. Under this new legislation, named in honor of the late Senator John H. Chafee, the federal allotment for the program doubled from \$70 million per year to \$140 million (Bell, 2002). The Foster Care Independence Act, which came to be known as the “Chafee Act,” was designed to strengthen supports for youth to make the transition from foster care to independent living (see accompanying text box on John H. Chafee).

### John H. Chafee

John H. Chafee, who died in October 1999 at the age of 77, served as an officer in the United States Marine Corps, Governor of Rhode Island, Secretary of the Navy, and a United States Senator for the State of Rhode Island. During the late 1980s and 1990s, Senator Chafee became an advocate for improving the U.S. health care system. He supported legislation to expand Medicaid coverage for low-income children and pregnant women, sponsored legislation to expand the availability of home and community-based services for persons with disabilities and worked to enact legislation to establish Federally Qualified Health Centers. He was a leader in promoting services and supports for young people currently and formerly in foster care.

Under the new law, funds were to be used to help young people by offering them the education, vocational and employment training necessary to obtain employment and/or prepare for post secondary education, training in daily living skills, substance abuse prevention, pregnancy prevention and preventive health activities. The new law also recognized the needs of young people ages 18 to 21 who had left foster care, providing states with federal resources (to be matched with state dollars) and options to provide services for young people who had left foster care but had not reached age 21, provide room and board for young people ages 18 to 21 who had left foster care, and extend Medicaid to 18, 19 and 20-year-olds who had emancipated from foster care. The new law offered states greater flexibility in designing their independent living programs and established accountability for states in implementing these programs.

The Chafee Act made significant improvements in the federal independent living program in several areas:

- It expanded the population eligible to receive independent living services, removing the reference to a minimum age eligibility and mandating that states provide independent living services to young people between the ages of 18 and 21 who had aged out of foster care. Under the Chafee Act, states can serve: young people of various ages who need help preparing for self-sufficiency (not only those ages 16 and over as in previous law), young people at various stages of achieving independence, and youth and young adults in different parts of the state differently. The law also changed the asset limit for the federal foster care program to allow young people to have \$10,000 in savings (rather than the previous \$1,000 limit) and still be eligible for foster care payments.
- It provided greater flexibility to states by allowing them to use a variety of providers to deliver independent living services.
- It required states to consult with federally recognized Indian tribal organizations and serve tribal young people on the same basis as other young people in the state. Prior law did not specify that states consult with American Indian tribes or serve Indian youth in particular.
- It required states to ensure that young people in independent living programs participate directly in designing their own services and supports to prepare them for adulthood and further stated that young people “accept personal responsibility for living up to their part of the program.”
- It expanded resources for housing for young people by enabling states to use up to 30 percent of their Chafee funds on housing for young people currently and formerly in foster care ages 18 to 21.
- It enabled states to extend health care to young people under the age of 21 who were under the responsibility of the state on their 18th birthday through a new Medicaid pathway, the “Chafee option.”



Later amendments in FY 2002 further strengthened educational and training opportunities for young people by authorizing discretionary funding to states and eligible Indian tribes to provide education and training vouchers (ETVs) for eligible young people. The ETV program offers financial help to young people currently and formerly in foster care to attend colleges, universities, vocational or technical programs. Under the program, eligible students may receive up to \$5,000 in funds, based on the cost of attendance formula established by their school of choice and any unmet need they may have within the schools' financial aid award. ETV awards can help fund tuition, fees, books, housing, transportation and other school-related costs.

Despite the many positive contributions of the Chafee Act, the law continued the philosophy of the initial Independent Living Program by placing emphasis on making young people in foster care "independent" at an age when few young people in the general United States population have even the rudimentary skills to survive wholly on their own. Importantly, the Act did not address the critical role of families in young adults' lives nor the basic support that families typically provide their young adult children well past the age of 18 or 21. The Act did not reference permanence as a critical outcome for young people in foster care. Further, the Act did not recognize the importance of providing young people with opportunities to build strong relationships with adults and peers, participate in structured activities, and develop a broad and diverse network of social support.

### How has the Chafee Act Been Implemented?

Immediately following the passage of the Act in 1999, it became apparent that many states were not prepared to use their allocated Chafee dollars. Early in the law's implementation, many states returned federal dollars to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), having failed to put services and programs in place. States' initial Chafee independent living plans were primarily checklists and involved classes for youth in foster care. In 2004, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2004) released a report that examined states' implementation of the Chafee Act. The GAO found that following the enactment of the Chafee Act, 40 states reported having expanded independent living services to youth younger than they had previously served, and 36 states reported serving older youth. Forty-five states reported offering assistance with room and board to young people who emancipated from care. The report, however, also raised concerns about the implementation of the Chafee Act:

- States varied in the percentage of eligible young people served, ranging from 10% to 100%. One-third of the states served less than half of eligible young people. Serving all eligible young people continues to be an issue. Chapin Hall, in its survey conducted before the enactment of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009), found that:
  - Only 16% of states reported providing Chafee services such as training in daily living skills to foster youth before their 14th birthdays.
  - More than 25% of the states reported that eligibility for Chafee services does not begin before the age of 15.
- One-half of the states reported that young people formerly in foster care who were adopted were NOT eligible for aftercare services and supports or were only eligible in some situations.
- The GAO found gaps in the availability of mental health services, mentoring services, and securing safe and suitable housing, particularly in rural areas.
- In response to the GAO survey, 49 states reported increased coordination with federal, state and local programs that could provide or supplement independent living services. In follow up interviews with child welfare administrators, however, the GAO found that most were unaware of these services.
- Finally, the GAO found a lack of uniformity among the states' Chafee 5-year plans that precluded using them at the state and federal level to monitor how well the programs served eligible young people.

With respect to the option to extend Medicaid to youth beyond the age of 18, a 2009 survey found that 29 states had extended Medicaid coverage to youth. The researchers found that all but four of these states limited extended Medicaid coverage to young people formerly in foster care who were in care on their 18th birthdays. They further found that states imposed other eligibility requirements. A majority, for example, required young people formerly in foster care to complete an application, with only one state reporting that eligibility was automatic (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009).

In 2007, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute surveyed 800 social workers about independent living services for young people currently or formerly in foster care. Although most survey respondents believed that their states provided independent living services before young people age out of foster care, most also believed that young people faced significant problems upon leaving foster care. A large percentage of social workers (84%) rated unemployment as a major/moderate problem for young people who had aged out of foster care; 47.6% believed that most young people did not have access to physical health care; and 52.3% believed that most young people did not have access to mental health care (Leigh, Huff, Jones, & Marshall, 2007).

In 2007, The National Foster Care Coalition and Casey Family Programs issued a report on the education and training (ETV) program that federal law established for young people. Programs in six states – California, Maine, Montana, New York, North Carolina, and Wyoming – were studied. The study found that states were implementing promising approaches in enrolling young people in ETV programs, using web application processes, extensive promotion and outreach about the program to young people, and contracting through third parties. Nonetheless, the study found there were numerous barriers to successful implementation of the ETV program, including:

- Meeting the demand for the program
- Recruiting young people to the program and ensuring that they had sufficient support to remain in school
- Tracking how voucher funds were spent
- Conveying to university financial aid staff the rules associated with the ETV program
- Maintaining the confidentiality of the young people's foster care experiences
- Connecting non-college bound young people to vocational programs
- Meeting the needs of parenting young people

Reports from a number of states indicate that many state agencies continue to use their funds to offer classes in independent living skills, often in group care settings. Surveys show that significant numbers of young people in foster care – up to 90 percent in some states – do not receive many services to prepare them for adulthood (Social Policy Report Brief, 2009). In the first round of the Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs), the federal government found strengths in a few states related to increased involvement of young people in case planning and other relevant activities as well as an increased focus on permanence for youth (Winkle, Ansell, & Newman, 2004). The CFSRs, however, identified a number of common barriers to fully engaging young people and adequately preparing them for adulthood:

- The most common identified barrier was inadequate or non-existent services, including service gaps related to life skills training, job skills training, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, general independent living services, inpatient mental health treatment services, services for pregnant or parenting teens and independent living assessments.
- The second most common barrier was a lack of placement resources for adolescents, including transitional living placements, homes for young people over 18, and homes for teens who were pregnant and parenting.
- Other barriers that were identified included gaps in youth-specific training for staff and foster parents, the absence of specialized training in assessing young people's needs, and inconsistency in services across the state or among providers in a single area of the state (Winkle, Ansell, & Newman, 2004).

Although most states now use their full Chafee financial allotments, some states continue to return funds to the federal government. In FY 2005, 13 states returned between 0.1% and 26.4% of their individual Chafee allocations (Fernandez, 2008).

## The National Youth in Transition Database

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 Act required the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), in consultation with federal, state, and local officials, advocates, service providers, and researchers, to develop outcome measures to assess state performance in preparing young people for independent living. The Act required that the following outcomes be assessed: educational attainment, employment, avoidance of dependency, homelessness, non-marital childbirth, high-risk behaviors, and incarceration. In addition, the Act required DHHS to collect data necessary to track how many young people are receiving independent living services and the services received and provided and to implement a plan for collecting needed information. DHHS was required to report to Congress and propose state accountability procedures and penalties for non-compliance. The Act also set aside \$2.1 million for a national evaluation and for technical assistance to states in assisting young people transitioning from foster care.

In response to these Congressional mandates, DHHS administrators and a DHHS working group consulted with stakeholders and reviewed child welfare literature to identify the data elements to be collected and reported to the database and the outcomes relevant to assessing states' Chafee Foster Care Independence Plans. HHS conducted a pilot test in 2001 involving seven states and an Indian tribe. In these jurisdictions, caseworkers collected data about young people, identified unclear data elements, and described any difficulties they encountered in collecting the information. In 2006, DHHS issued a notice of proposed rulemaking (NPRM) for the data collection system, providing a 60-day comment period (Fernandez, 2008).

The final regulations establishing the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) became effective April 28, 2009 and require states to report data on young people beginning in FY 2011 (Fernandez, 2008). Beginning in October 2010, states are required to report data on young people currently and formerly in foster care who received independent living services ("served youth") and youth formerly in care regardless of whether they received independent living services ("tracked youth"). States must collect baseline information for all young people in care at age 17 (baseline) and then follow up with a sample of those individuals at ages 19 and 21. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008a). States will survey young people and report data on six outcomes:

- Financial self-sufficiency (employment data, assistance receipt)
- Educational attainment (enrollment/attendance, completion)
- Positive connections with adults (adult connections are not defined)
- Homelessness
- High-risk behavior (incarceration, substance abuse referral, childbirth)
- Access to health insurance (Medicaid, other insurance)

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008b)

It is anticipated that states will find the logistics of collecting these data challenging. The U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2003 that 30 states had tried to contact young people who had emancipated from foster care for initial information, including employment and education. Of those states, most reported that they were unsuccessful in contacting more than half of the young people. Further, 21 states reported attempting to follow up with young people after a longer period of time had elapsed from their emancipation from care but had trouble reaching all them. State officials explained that collecting outcome data is especially challenging because there is little they can do to find young people. Other officials, according to the GAO, expressed concern that young people who are doing well would be more likely to participate in the follow-up interviews, thus skewing the results.

States that fail to provide the required data will be penalized between one and five percent of their annual Chafee Foster Care Independence Program allotment for each reporting period, depending on the standard that was not achieved (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008a). This penalty level may be perceived as minor in light of the expenses involved in locating and interviewing young people, leading some states to opt not to provide the data.

These concerns raise important issues with respect to the implementation of the NYTD. First, will states opt to collect the data given the challenges and the relatively minor penalties? Second, will the results accurately reflect the outcomes for young adults formerly in foster care?

## Youth in Foster Care: A Data Snapshot and Research Findings

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 emphasized permanence for all children and youth in foster care and the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 emphasized preparing young people for adulthood. It might have been expected that these two federal statutes, taken together, would result in a decline in the number of youth aging out of foster care and improved outcomes for those who emancipate from foster care and begin the transition to adulthood. Unfortunately, neither of these outcomes have been realized. The number of youth aging out of foster care has continued to rise each year, and research continues to show dismal outcomes for young people who emancipate from foster care.

The number of youth ages 14 to 18 in foster care has remained stable for the most recent five years of available data, ranging from 165,000 (FY 2002 and FY 2006) to 167,000 (FY 2004) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). For each fiscal year, youth ages 14 to 18 represent 20 percent of the foster care population. However, as Table 1 shows, the number of youth aging out of foster care has grown steadily each year, as has the percentage of all exits from foster care that are to “emancipation.” In total, more than 230,000 youth aged out of foster care between FY 1999 and FY 2008 (Kids Are Waiting, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

**Table 1. Number of Youth Aging Out and Percentage of Exits that are to Emancipation (Aging Out)**

| Year | Number of Youth Who Aged Out | Total Number in Foster Care | % of exits from foster care that were to emancipation |
|------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1999 | 18,964                       | 567,000                     | 3.3   |
| 2000 | 20,172                       | 552,000                     | 3.7   |
| 2001 | 19,039                       | 545,000                     | 3.5   |
| 2002 | 20,358                       | 533,000                     | 3.8   |
| 2003 | 22,432                       | 520,000                     | 4.3   |
| 2004 | 23,121                       | 517,000                     | 4.5   |
| 2005 | 24,407                       | 513,000                     | 4.9   |
| 2006 | 26,517                       | 510,000                     | 5.2   |
| 2007 | 29,730                       | 491,000                     | 10  |
| 2008 | 29,516                       | 463,000                     | 10  |

Sources: Kids Are Waiting, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008b; Cornell University, National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (2007 data).

Studies of young people who age out of foster care have documented the extremely poor outcomes for large numbers of young people. A study by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago has followed young people aging out of foster care in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois. The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) has compared these young people with a national sample and found:

*“In comparison with their peers, they are, on average, less likely to have a high school diploma, less likely to be pursuing higher education, less likely to be earning a living wage, more likely to have experienced economic hardships, more likely to have had a child outside of wedlock, and more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system” (Courtney, et al., 2007, p. 84).*

Research consistently has found that young people who age out of foster care:

### **Suffer academically**

- A Washington State study (2004) found that youth in foster care were twice as likely to fall below standards on states’ standardized 10th grade test.

**Have poor secondary school outcomes**

- One study found that only 48% of young people emancipating from foster care had completed high school, compared to about 85% of all 18 to 24 year olds (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).
- The Washington State study found that one-half of young adults who emancipated from foster care had completed high school or obtained a GED (State of Washington, 2004).
- Nearly one quarter of young adults in the Midwest Evaluation had not obtained a high school diploma or GED at age 21 (Courtney, et al., 2007).

**Face challenges in attending and completing college**

- Only 30% of young adults in the Midwest Evaluation had completed any college by age 21, compared to 53% of young adults in the comparison group (Courtney, et al., 2007).
- Another study found that young people in foster care enroll in college at significantly lower rates than their peers: between 10 percent and 30 percent of young people in foster care compared to 60 percent of young people not in care (Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, & Wyatt, 2005).
- The Northwest Alumni study conducted by Casey Family Programs found that only 2% of young people in foster care completed college (Pecora, et al., 2005).

**Are at risk of early pregnancy**

- The Midwest Evaluation found that 71% of females aging out of foster care become pregnant before 21 compared to the 34% of the general population of females. Repeat pregnancies were common among females aging out of foster care: among those who had ever been pregnant, 62% had been pregnant more than once (compared to 33% of the females in the comparison group). Half of the young men in the Midwest Evaluation reported having gotten a female pregnant, compared to 19% in the comparison group (Courtney, et al., 2007).

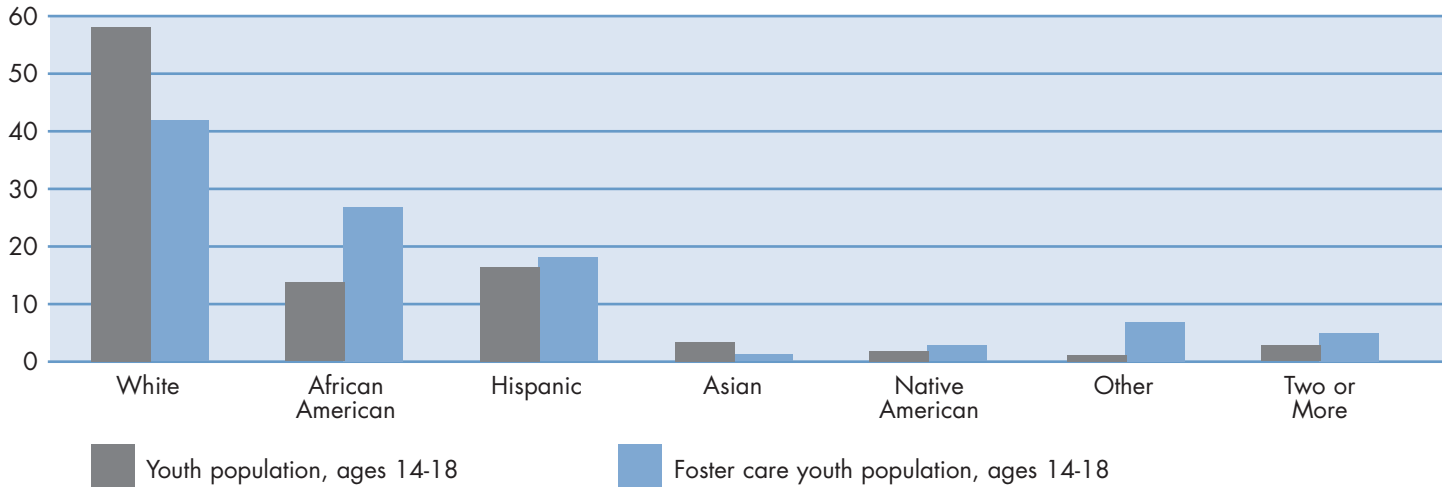
**Are at risk of arrest and incarceration**

- In the Midwest Evaluation, 31% of the young adults reported being arrested by age 21; 15% reported being convicted of a crime; and 30% reported being incarcerated at some point. The level of criminal involvement was higher among young men. Females, however, were significantly more likely than males in the comparison group to report ever being arrested (57% vs. 20%), ever being convicted (25% vs. 12%) and ever being arrested as an adult (33% vs. 8%) (Courtney, et al., 2007).
- A study by Chapin Hall found that both males and females who had formerly been in foster care were over ten times more likely to report having been arrested since age 18 than young people in a comparison group (Cusick & Courtney, 2007).

There also has been a growing understanding of and attention to racial disparities in services, opportunities and outcomes for young people in foster care. Over the past few years, several studies and analyses have brought attention to the disproportionate representation of children and youth of color in the foster care system and race-based disparities in outcomes (Casey-CSSP Alliance on Racial Equity, 2007; Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2007; Dworsky, et al., in press; Harris, et al., 2010; Harris & Skyles, 2008; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). Data demonstrate that children of color are disproportionately represented in foster care (see Figure 2). Racial disproportionality is most severe for African American children and youth, but Native American children also experience higher rates of representation in foster care than children of other races and ethnicities (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). African American, Native American and multi-racial youth are overrepresented in the foster youth population at a rate nearly double their representation in the general youth population (See Figure 1 on the following page).



**Figure 1. Proportion of Young People Ages 14-18 By Race in the General Population and in Foster Care Settings, End of Fiscal Year 2006**



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

A growing body of research literature has documented the disparate outcomes for children and youth of color, particularly African American children and youth:

- Seven studies, dating from 1963 to 1996, found that children of color who come into contact with the child welfare system are disadvantaged with respect to the range and quality of services that they receive, the type of agency to which they are referred, the efficiency with which their cases are handled, and the outcomes of their cases (Hill, 2001). African American children and youth remain in foster care longer than their counterparts. An Illinois study found that African American children, who represented 47% of the children in foster care in the state, represented only 41% of the children exiting to permanent families within three years (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008).
- African American children and youth are less likely to achieve permanency through reunification. A Washington State study found that white children, when compared to children of color, were more likely to exit to reunification (71% compared to 63% of African American children and 54% of Native American children), but that children of color were more likely to exit to adoption (15% of African American children and 21% of Native American children compared to 12% of white children) and to guardianship (14% of African American children and 16% of Native American children compared to 10% of white children) (King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality, 2004).
- The Washington State study also found that African American children (25%) and multi-racial children (22%) who were legally free for adoption were less likely than white children (37%) and Native American children (42%) to be adopted. It found that African American and Native American children wait much longer than white children for adoptive families. Compared to an average time of 39 months from placement to adoption for white children, African American children waited an average of 62 months and Native American children waited an average of 52 months (King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality, 2004).

### Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: Implications for Society

In addition to the growing recognition of the dismal outcomes at a personal level for many young people who age out of foster care, the fiscal impact of allowing them to age out of foster care is beginning to be recognized. Calculations of the “costs of bad outcomes” for young people – costs that could be saved if young people formerly in foster care did as well as others their age – are being developed (Cutler Consulting, 2009). Taking into account three important areas – education, unplanned pregnancy, and criminal justice system involvement, Cutler Consulting has estimated that the cost of the outcome differences between young people aging out of foster care and the general population is nearly \$5.7 billion for each annual cohort of young people leaving care (see Table 2 on the following page).

Table 2. Savings Realized When Young People Exiting Foster Care Achieve Outcomes Comparable to their Non-Foster Care Peers

| Area  | Cost Measure   | Estimated Savings      |
|---|--|------------------------|
| Education   | One cohort of youth in foster care graduating at the rate of the general population (based on costs of 25 percent of aging out population each year failing to graduate)   | \$748,800,000          |
| Unplanned pregnancy   | One cohort year of unplanned parenthood based on the cost of first 15 years of life for the first child (based on estimates regarding the number of live pregnancies to young women who age out of foster care)        | \$115,627,350          |
| Criminal justice system involvement   | One cohort year of criminal justice system involvement costs for a criminal career (based on estimates of the number of young people who become engaged in the criminal justice system after aging out of foster care) | \$4,833,736,200        |
| <b>Total savings for education, unplanned pregnancy, and criminal justice system involvement for each cohort year</b> |  | <b>\$5,698,163,550</b> |

Source: Cutler Consulting, 2009

### What Have We Learned Since 1999?

Much has been learned since the Chafee Act was enacted in 1999. Key to these lessons has been the growing recognition that the vision for all young people, including those in foster care, is a successful transition to adulthood by age 25. This section of this paper describes what has been learned with a focus on this vision. It then reviews some of the key developments over the past decade in research, practice and policy as they relate to young people currently and formerly in foster care.

### The Vision: Successful Transitions to Adulthood by Age 25

Since the enactment of the Chafee Act in 1999, a new vision, captured by the concept of “connected by 25”, has emerged. “Connected by 25” represents a common yardstick that reflects the convergence of full brain development, completion of college and other postsecondary education, and connections to employment, further education, child-rearing, and other pursuits that take place by age 25. Young adults who are connected by 25 have acquired the skills they need to participate in the labor force, establish their own households, and develop positive social networks for themselves (Wald & Martinez, 2003). Over the past decade, the overarching vision within which services and supports are provided to young people has increasingly focused on the goal of supporting them to make successful transitions to adulthood by age 25.

As attention has focused on successful transitions to adulthood by age 25, the knowledge base has grown about what young people need to achieve this goal. Six key factors have been identified:

- 1) **Family:** Family supports and connections and services to strengthen the relationships between parents and young people and between other caregivers and young people
- 2) **Education and training:** School success and opportunities to learn basic life skills
- 3) **Opportunities to experience and ultimately select employment and career paths:** Job opportunities, exposure to the universe of employment paths, connections to people who can provide access to opportunities, and mentors
- 4) **Social and civic engagement in the community:** Social opportunities that promote a culture of being a contributor rather than victim
- 5) **Health care**
- 6) **A web of supportive relationships that give meaning to life**

(Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009)

The growing knowledge base has made clear that successful transition to adulthood flows from stability and continuity in young people's lives. Stability and continuity support the young person's ability to establish relationships, including romantic relationships; function at a high level of literacy, financial literacy, and management of adult responsibility in modern society; bring occupational and employment skills into the 21st century market place; and contribute to others' well-being in neighborhoods and communities (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009).

In embracing the vision of "connected by 25," there has been a growing awareness that some young adults reach the age of 25 without having successfully transitioned to independent adulthood (Wald & Martinez, 2003). "Disconnected youth" have been defined as young people ages 14 to 24 who are not in school and not working, or who lack family or other support networks (Wald & Martinez, 2003). In general, these young people lack family supports to sustain their connection to school, lack community connections, live in impoverished neighborhoods, and have poor educational opportunities and few job prospects (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009). The majority of young people who do not make a successful transition to adulthood fall within four groups (Wald & Martinez, 2003):

- 1) Those who do not complete high school
- 2) Those deeply involved with the juvenile justice system
- 3) Young, unmarried mothers
- 4) Young people placed in foster care

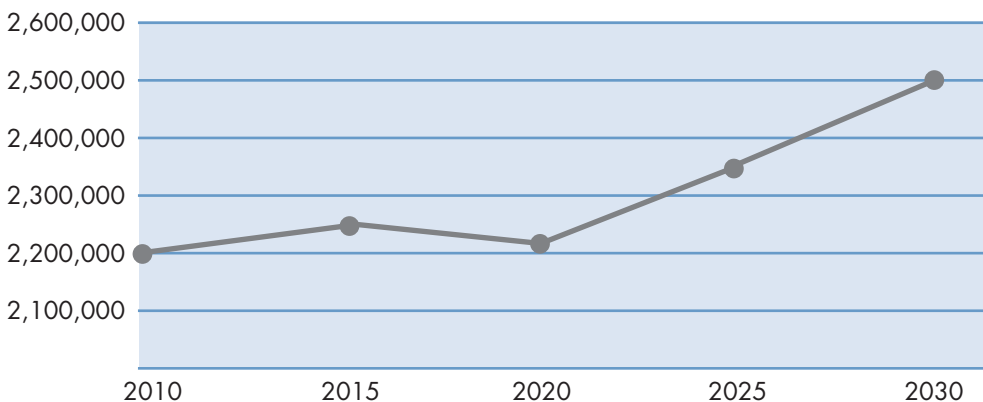
There is significant overlap among these groups, particularly when considering young people in foster care. Research shows that one-half of young people placed in foster care have not completed high school; each year, young people "crossover" from the foster care system to the juvenile justice system; and young women who exit foster care at age 18 are at heightened risk of early pregnancy (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009).

"The lack of social support for disconnected youth stands in stark contrast to the extensive support provided to the best situated, most likely to succeed young adults – 25-30% of all youth who attend four-year colleges and obtain Bachelor's degrees. Most of these youth receive strong family support; the majority live in higher income households. Beyond what their parents provide, society invests billions of dollars in these youth and provides them with an extensive support system... There is a compelling need to create a similar system of support and opportunity for those youth least likely to make a successful transition by age 25 and to attract youth to it."

*Wald & Martinez, 2003, pp. 2-3.*

A recent analysis projects that the number of disconnected young people will likely continue to rise if efforts are not made to ensure that they receive the services and supports they need (Rosch, Brinson, & Hassel, 2008). Figure 2 shows the projected increase in the disconnected population of young adults 19 to 24 years old (the researchers assumed that the percent of disconnected youth would remain constant and then applied those percentages to the census bureau's future population projections).

**Figure 2. Projected Population of Disconnected Youth 2006 to 2030**



Source: Rosch, Brinson, & Hassel, 2008

### Developments Over the Past Decade: Lessons Learned Through Research, Practice and Policy

Coinciding with the emphasis on successful transitions to adulthood by age 25 has been a growing body of research on what young people need to achieve this goal. At the same time, there has been an evolution over the past decade in practices and policies that have significantly reshaped the landscape since the passage of the Chafee Act in 1999.

Since its founding in 2001, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative has worked with localities and states across the country and through collaborative partnerships, has produced innovations and realized successes in improving outcomes for young people in or formerly in foster care. The Initiative's Theory of Change is that in order to improve outcomes, a community needs to have certain conditions in place:

- Young people are decision makers and advocates for themselves and others;
- Systems partners, both public and private, provide the necessary resources and supports;
- Stakeholders use data to drive decision-making and communications and the documentation of results;
- Public will and policy are galvanized and focused on the reforms necessary to improve outcomes; and
- Young people have access to an array of opportunities to support them.

The Initiative designed a set of strategies and related activities to help create or support these conditions in communities. The Initiative believes that these conditions will maximize the impact on public and private systems, leading to better supports and increased opportunities which, when accessed by young people, will improve their life outcomes. To test this Theory of Change, the Initiative formed partnerships with communities across the country to implement the set of strategies and track both systems and youth outcomes.

#### The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative: Five Core Strategies

**Youth Engagement:** *Developing the skills and leadership techniques of young people so that they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of implementation and become advocates for themselves.*

**Partnerships and Resources:** *Bringing together key local decision-makers and other people of influence who take responsibility for leveraging public and private resources to provide increased opportunities for young people in foster care.*

**Research, Evaluation and Communications:** *Documenting results and identifying and disseminating evidence-based and promising practices.*

**Public Will and Policy:** *Galvanizing public will in order to influence local and state policies and practices to increase opportunities for young people leaving foster care.*

**Increased Opportunities:** *Organizing resources and creating opportunities for young people leaving foster care through the Opportunity Passport™. The Opportunity Passport™ is a package of resources designed to create financial, education, vocational, health care, entrepreneurial and recreational opportunities for young people leaving foster care.*

Through this work, the Initiative and its community partners have learned much that builds on and adds to the developments in the areas of youth engagement, permanence and data that have shaped the child welfare environment since the Chafee Act was enacted in 1999.

**The following ten key learnings have emerged since 1999:**

- 1) Permanence is vital for youth.
- 2) Young people must be served from a youth development and developmentally appropriate perspective.
- 3) Young people must be engaged in planning for their futures and in advocacy.
- 4) Independent living programs have not been successful in preparing young people in foster care for adulthood.
- 5) Young people currently and formerly in foster care need to build financial resources and assets.
- 6) Data must be available to track outcomes and drive decisions in communities and states.
- 7) Partnerships and resources are essential in achieving positive outcomes for young people currently or formerly in foster care.
- 8) Public policy and public will are critical elements in effectively serving young people currently and formerly in foster care.
- 9) Court involvement is crucial to achieving and monitoring positive outcomes for young people in foster care.
- 10) The leveraging of finances and ideas is key to successful outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care.

**The following discusses each of these key learnings.**

- 1) Permanence is vital for youth.

*“Decades of research – not to mention cultural history and experience point to one incontrovertible fact: there is no substitute for a family in the preparation of children and youth for adulthood, including through extended adolescence. Inherent in that statement is the value of consistency and stability that a family provides in a relationship that has no expiration date, a permanent relationship.”*

*Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009, p. 38 (emphases in original).*

**The Role of Family**

In 1980, with the enactment of the federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, permanency planning became a primary child welfare focus. That focus has continued with subsequent federal and state legislation, with efforts to ensure that each child in foster care has a permanent family through safe reunification, placement with relatives, adoption or guardianship. Little attention was paid throughout the 1990s, however, to finding permanent families for older youth in foster care and no attention was given to the permanency needs of youth after they reached the age of 18. “Independent living”, not permanence, was the central goal for older youth in care, as evidenced by the stated goals of the Chafee Act and the lack of attention paid by child welfare agencies to finding families for youth in care once they reached mid-adolescence.

Since 1999, the almost exclusive focus on preparing young people in care to live independently has shifted as awareness has grown that there is no substitute for a family in raising children and preparing them for adulthood, including supporting them through the increasingly longer process of becoming a self-sufficient adult. There has been recognition that, for all youth including youth in foster care, it is families that provide the natural context in which young people learn about behavioral norms, acquire new skills and capacities, and benefit from modeling about what is possible in their lives (Buss, et al., 2008).



The literature on family permanence for young people has burgeoned over the past decade, with increasing levels of attention paid to the importance of family in their lives. Much of the focus has been on achieving legal permanence for young people through reunification, adoption or guardianship. The National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning and Casey Family Services (2004, p. 1), for example, defines “permanence” as “achieved with a family relationship that offers safe, stable, and committed parenting, unconditional love and lifelong support, and legal family membership status” (emphasis added). Over the past decade, a number of states and localities have developed resources, tools, and practices to strengthen their permanency practices with older youth in foster care, including practices that have broadened the understanding of permanence for older youth beyond legal family relationships (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Efforts to Promote Family Permanence for Youth in Foster Care: State and Local Examples**

| State          | Youth Permanency Efforts  |
|----------------|---|
| California     | <i>Declaration of Commitment to Permanent Lifelong Connections for Foster Youth</i> (signed by over 140 organizations, agencies and communities in California evidencing a commitment to work toward permanence for youth in foster care).<br><br><i>Permanency: A Statewide Commitment to Sustainability</i> developed by the Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership* |
| Colorado       | <i>Project UPLIFT: Caring Connections for Adolescents</i> (connects youth in foster care with adults with whom they were previously involved)   |
| Maine          | <i>Child Welfare Permanency Policy</i> (developed with youth, describes how permanence is to be achieved for adolescents in foster care)  |
| Massachusetts  | <i>Promising Practices and Lesson Learned</i> (the results of a statewide initiative to develop, test and implement practices designed to achieve permanence for adolescents)   |
| Michigan       | <i>Youth Service Delivery Model</i> (a youth-driven teaming model that ensures that all youth, the significant adults in their lives, and their peers are actively engaged in planning for permanence, with the goal of all youth having a job, housing, education, access to health care, and transportation before exiting care)                                      |
| New York City  | <i>Finding Permanent Homes to Prevent Homelessness</i> (recruits families for youth from foster care; families are trained and prepared to provide permanence through adoption)   |
| New York State | <i>Adolescent Services and Outcomes Practice Paper</i> (provides agencies with a framework for achieving permanence for adolescents in foster care)   |
| Rhode Island   | <i>Achieving Permanency for Children and Youth in Foster Care</i> (provides guidelines for strengthening permanency planning practice for adolescents in care)  |

Sources: *Child Welfare Information Gateway (2006a)*; *National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (2009)*.

\* Available at:

<http://www.cacfs.org/materials/Permanency%20%20A%20Statewide%20Approach%20to%20Sustainability%202-2009.pdf>

Research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the role of family in young people’s lives. Studies have shown that having a permanent supportive relationship with family and feeling connected to an adult are keys to the long- and short-term well-being of youth and young adults (Avery, 2009; Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002). Avery (2009), in her work on social capital – the social support that parents or other significant adults provide to promote their children’s success in life – found that the most secure, long-lasting, and strongest social capital for young people aging out of foster care is a permanent nuclear and extended family. Studies have verified what many child welfare professionals already knew: young people in foster care maintain strong connections to their families of origin (Petr, 2008) and many who “age out” of foster care return to live with their biological families (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008).

Recently, attention has focused on listening to the voices of youth and young adults in order to understand what “permanence” means to them. Samuels (2008) explored the role of social support networks in a study of young people ages 17 to 26 who were in or formerly in foster care and who were Opportunity Passport™ participants. Among her key findings:

- The young people sought the emotional support of family. They earnestly made every effort to reconnect with family and to form family-like connections with peers and adults.
- The supportive relationships described by the young people included their connections with child welfare professionals, but they did not see most of these relationships as permanent.
- Most often, the young people reported that emotional support (both while in foster care and in young adulthood) was the type of support most needed and most missing.
- Most young people described a sense of hope for permanence in relationships, but were not confident that it would happen.

These findings led Samuels to conclude, “In thinking about relational permanence, the role of the biological family must be extended beyond that family’s official or legal status in a child’s permanency plan. Biological family remains psychologically present for participants despite their physical separation. Taking a family-centered approach that recognizes multiple family relationships, memberships and affiliations could represent an important philosophical, policy and practice shift.” (Samuels, 2008, p. 5).

These developments have begun to inform new thinking about fully integrating permanence and preparation for adulthood services for all youth in care, rather than placing young people on either a “permanence” track or an “independent living” track. Samuels (2008) challenges the very notion of “independent living” and advocates a move toward a concept of healthy adulthood as interdependent and interrelated. Buss and colleagues (2008, p. 36) describe the “false conflict between independence and permanency,” and advocate for the pursuit of both goals – establishing permanent relationships and preparing the youth for adulthood – for all youth. In line with these views of full service integration, the California National Governors Association Policy Academy Team (n.d) has identified three fundamental goals for each transition-age young person in foster care: permanence (lifelong connections with family and supportive adults); education (a high school diploma and support in pursuing post-secondary opportunities); and employment (work experience and training opportunities that will prepare them for and place them in living wage employment and careers).

“Policy and practice in child welfare has evolved from ‘independent living’ being the goal – often even a placement – to the integration of permanence with preparation for adulthood. That is how we treat our own children. We no longer accept that teens in foster care do not need permanent connections as they enter early adulthood. On the contrary, those of us who are parents intuitively know that these two cannot be separated, that preparation for adulthood is inextricably linked to permanence.”

*Gary Stangler, Written testimony before the Senate Committee on Finance, Hearing on Fostering Permanence, May 10, 2006*

## Relationships and Connections

Over the past decade, far greater attention has been focused on sibling relationships as a critical aspect of young people’s well-being and as vital, permanent family relationships. Research and practice have underscored the emotional power of sibling relationships and their critical importance not only in childhood but over the course of a lifetime (Herrick & Pincus, 2005). When caregivers abuse or neglect children, siblings often have especially strong ties to one another and find safety and emotional support in their relationships with one another (Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, & Ashare, 2005; Washington, 2007). The importance of placing siblings together or, when placement together is not possible, maintaining connections and sibling bonds increasingly has been recognized in practice and law (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006). State laws, including those of California, New York, and Illinois, have long required preservation of sibling relationships (Cohn, 2008). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires state child welfare agencies to make reasonable efforts to place siblings together and if siblings are not placed together, to ensure that siblings maintain connections through frequent visitation or other ongoing interactions.

“Former foster children...live on as adults. [They] make their way through the world with whatever family they have left...[and] siblings may well turn out to be the most important family members in the lives of these young people.”

*Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003, p. 51.*

Work that has taken place across the country has deepened the understanding of the importance of family permanence for young people in foster care. Federal leadership by the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services led to the award of nine grants in October of 2005 to explore innovative programs to achieve youth permanence. These grantees have addressed youth permanence in creative ways, including development of curriculum and attitude scales about options for youth permanence, including open adoption. They have demonstrated success in connecting young people to permanent families through reunification, relative placement and adoption (National Resource Center on Adoption, n.d.).

The Initiative’s work with young people in communities across the country also has deepened the understanding of the vital role of permanence in youth’s lives. The Initiative’s direct communication with youth about their views of “permanence” has strengthened the understanding of what “permanence” means to youth. Young people in many communities have expressed the need to move beyond a legal definition of permanence and to agree on a working definition of what it means for older youth and young adults who have already exited the foster care system. The Initiative’s research revealed that many young people have their own individual definitions of permanence.

“Permanency is where you feel at home, where you feel your support network is, and where you feel most comfortable.”

*Participant, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative*

In its research, the Initiative has found that when young people report having permanence, they:

- Are more likely to report having enough people to count on;
- Are more likely to report safe, stable, and affordable housing once out of care; and
- Are more likely to report having health insurance once out of care.

The data also show that for those young people who do not report permanence, there is decrease over time in the percent that say they have enough people to count on. These findings possibly illustrate an increasing “disconnectedness” that young people experience after leaving foster care without a permanent adult in their lives.

2) Youth must be served from a youth development and developmentally appropriate perspective.

Since 1999, the view that youth should be served from a youth development and developmentally appropriate perspective has been strengthened by:

- The growing body of research on adolescent brain development
- Greater emphasis on positive youth development
- An understanding of the concept of “emerging adulthood” and the role of the family of origin
- Greater emphasis on developmentally appropriate programming

Each of these areas has informed the current understanding of how youth must be served, taking the field far beyond the understanding available in 1999.

## Adolescent Brain Development

“The distinction between youth and adults is not simply one of age, but one of motivation, impulse control, judgment, culpability, and physiological maturation.”

*Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2006*

Over the past ten years, a growing body of research has documented what parents have long suspected: the adolescent brain is different from the adult brain. Studies have revealed that adolescence and young adulthood are periods of gradual brain development that begins in puberty and may continue through the mid-20s (Giedd, et al., 1999). Among the key findings is that the brain’s frontal lobe – especially the prefrontal cortex which governs reasoning, decision-making, judgment, and impulse control – is the last part of the brain to reach full development, undergoing dramatic development in the teen years (Giedd, et al., 1999). Because this region of the brain is not fully developed, adolescents and young adults rely on emotional centers of the brain in making decisions. Although the limbic system, which helps to process and manage emotion, also develops during adolescence, it stands in for the underdeveloped frontal lobe to process emotions, causing adolescents to experience more impulsive behavior than adults (McNamee, 2006).

Research also confirms that levels of dopamine production shift during adolescence (Spear, 2003). Dopamine, a chemical produced by the brain, links action to pleasure and its redistribution can raise the threshold that is needed to feel pleasure. With shifts in dopamine production, adolescents may no longer find activities that they previously enjoyed to be exciting and may seek excitement through increasingly risky behaviors (Spear, 2003). Changes in dopamine and other chemical and physical changes explain the difficulties that many young adults have in controlling impulses, maintaining successful social relationships, engaging in long-term planning that promotes discipline in education and employment activities, and controlling emotional responses.

Studies further document that during adolescence, the gray matter of the brain begins to thin as the links between neurons that transmit and receives information – known as synapses – undergo a “pruning” process. Unused synapses are pruned away while synapses that are used frequently become stronger (Sowell, 2001). A process called myelination strengthens neurons, improving the connectivity between them and speeding up communication between cells. Pruning and myelination during adolescence can have important long-term consequences as the parts of the brain that are used frequently are strengthened and the parts that are not used less often weaken and die off (Sowell, 2001).

These changes in brain development have important implications for young people’s behavior, including:

- Different reactions in situations of “hot cognition” (situations with a high emotional context) and “cold cognition” (situations of lower emotional context)
- The focus on peer group, autonomy from parents, and development of self identity
- The tendency to make more emotionally-based decisions when with peers
- Greater susceptibility to risky decision making as levels of dopamine shift

These implications are important in considering what young people are able to do and the intrapersonal resources that they bring to the process of transitioning to adulthood. Of further importance for young people in or formerly in foster care are research findings that young people who have experienced emotional or physical trauma may suffer from delays in brain maturation because of brain development disruption (McNamee, 2006). The transition for young people in foster care to adulthood may be particularly complicated as a result of the negative developmental impact of trauma.

**Positive youth development**

Positive youth development is grounded in the recognition that youth who develop cognitively, emotionally and socially in a healthy way are likely to achieve their full potential as adults. Reaching their potential, however, requires that they have opportunities to explore a variety of interests, develop positive relationships with adults, find meaningful ways to participate in their communities, and prepare themselves for entry into the world of work or higher education. Young people who are at risk of being disconnected by 25 need appropriate and effective services to address the issues they confront and help them identify and develop their potential. There has been a growing understanding that developmentally appropriate services and supports across systems must be integrated and coordinated to achieve these goals (New York CAN Youth Development Committee, n.d.).

The growing knowledge base regarding adolescent brain development supports the concept of positive youth development, which emphasizes youth’s strengths, connecting youth with caring adults, empowering youth to assume leadership roles, promoting positive relationships with peers, challenging youth to build competence, and providing opportunities for youth to develop healthy behaviors (National Juvenile Justice Network, n.d.). A positive youth development focus helps youth slow down decision-making, make decisions in cold cognition environments, and support themselves with peers and adults that will positively influence their decisions. Positive youth development can help to ensure that synaptic pruning takes place in a healthy manner by providing youth with opportunities to use the parts of their brain that can support their future success.

**Supporting Healthy Synaptic Pruning of the Adolescent Brain through Positive Youth Development**

- Positive relationships with peers and adults
- Engagement in cultural and community activities
- Academic enrichment
- Building vocational and job application and training skills
- Opportunities for leadership
- Individual empowerment
- Positive inventories of the assets that youth have in their identity, expanding skill set and community

*Source: National Juvenile Justice Network, n.d.*

**The concept of “emerging adulthood” and the role of the family of origin**

Accompanying the growing understanding of adolescent brain development and greater appreciation for positive youth development has been a recognition that young people do not move from “adolescence” to adulthood and “independent living” at 18 or 21 but, instead, gradually transition to adulthood over a period of years. Studies demonstrate that the transition from adolescence to adulthood has become longer, more complex and less predictable than was the case in the first part of the 20th century (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Research shows that although the median age at which youth initially leave home is about 19 years, 40 percent of those who leave home for the first time between the ages of 18 and 24 return to live with their parents again, usually for a temporary time period (Aquilino, 1996). About one-quarter of all young adults do not leave home for the first time until age 22 or older (Aquilino, 1996). Currently, most young people delay their entry into adult roles until they complete their educations. A shrinking proportion of young people enter full time employment before their early 20s, and a growing percentage begin working full time only toward the end of their 20s (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). Parents continue to provide a range of supports for their adult children. Schoeni and Ross (2004), for example, found:

- Parents provide an average of \$2,200 annually to their children long after the age of 21 – a total of approximately \$38,000 between the ages of 18 and 34.
- The average time that parents spend on their transitioning children – including time devoted to emotional support or motivation, time giving advice and guidance, and time providing child care – is 367 hours each year – roughly equal to nine full weeks of employment.



When people are asked in national opinion surveys at what age children become self-sufficient, the average response is 24 years (Stangler, 2005). The Initiative's survey of parents of older children found they reported the self-sufficiency age to be even higher. In focus groups, parents were quite surprised to learn that foster care (or, at least, the care by foster parents) did not continue beyond age 18 (Lake, Snell, Perry, & Associates, 2003).

These research results are consistent with the changing concept of "dependent" in American law. As examples (Buss, et al., 2008):

- In 36 states, the law extends the period of "dependency" beyond age 18 for purposes of one parent seeking child support from the other parent.
- Since 1984, all states have raised the minimum age for buying and publicly possessing alcohol to age 21.
- In a growing trend, states are enacting laws that require insurance carriers to extend their coverage of dependent children into their young adulthood. As an example, New Mexico prohibits termination of health insurance for dependents based on age before a young person's 25th birthday regardless of enrollment in school. Utah's statute does the same until age 26.
- Tax laws encourage parents to continue an ongoing supportive relationship with their children by allowing them to claim their children as dependents through age 24 if the young person is a full time student for at least five months of the year, has the same residence as the parents for at least six months of the year, and does not provide more than half of his or her own support for the year.

With the recognition of the current realities of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, support has grown for the concept of "emerging adulthood," a period during which a young person moves toward independence rather than achieving it (Arnett, 2007). Using the concept of "emerging adulthood" as the theoretical framework, researchers describe the gradual transition to adulthood as one marked by linear increases over time in independence in the areas of residence, finances, romance and parenting (Avery, 2009; Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). Through this process, the individual's capacity to control impulses, calibrate risk and reward, regulate emotions, project the self into the future and think strategically grows (Labouvie-Vief, 2006). Researchers theorize that the consolidation of the status as an adult likely occurs closer to age 30 than age 20 (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003).

Successful development over the years of emerging adulthood is tied to the young person's relationships with his/her family of origin (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurtz, 1996). The family of origin serves as a base of operations as the young person explores adulthood, being both a physical base as parents provide a home, money, and other material support and an emotionally supportive base as parents and extended family provides guidance and wisdom (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Longitudinal studies indicate that parents' support for their children's healthy separation-individuation and adolescents' progress in that respect are predictors of adolescent adjustment and the ability to gain sufficiency as an adult (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Bell, Allen, Hauser, & O'Connor, 1996). Family relationships influence the psychological development of emerging adults and impact the emerging adult's ability to establish healthy interpersonal skills and form intimate relationships (Masten, Obradovic, & Burt, 2006; Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004). Coleman (1998) uses the term "social capital" to describe the many ways that parents advance their children's chances of healthy, successful lives.

### **The importance of developmentally appropriate services for youth**

In light of the goal of successful transition to adulthood by age 25, the growing understanding of adolescent brain development and the role of positive youth development, and an appreciation of the concept of "emerging adulthood," the importance of developmentally appropriate programming for youth in foster care has taken on new meaning. Greater attention has been given to the provision of developmentally appropriate services that begin at age 14 to prepare youth to be connected, productive adults by 25 – and not, as has been the traditional practice, providing services at age 16 or 17 and viewing age 18 as the "finish line" for youth service systems. A growing body of work has focused on the importance of providing services and supports for young people based on both their chronological age and developmental attainment, including educational programming (Carnegie Corporation of New York, n.d.), health care services (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003), mental health services (American Psychological Association, 2008; Rimschmidt & Belfer, 2005), and substance abuse treatment services (Mark, et al., 2006).

Over the past decade, the importance of supporting young people in foster care past their 18th birthday has achieved recognition in research, practice and policy. The Chafee Act addresses services and supports for young people who leave foster care, providing resources to states to deliver independent living services to young people who age out of foster care between the ages of 18 and 21 and providing states with the option of providing Medicaid coverage to those who aged out of foster care through age 21. It did not, however, address extension of foster care through age 21, although some states did so through state policy

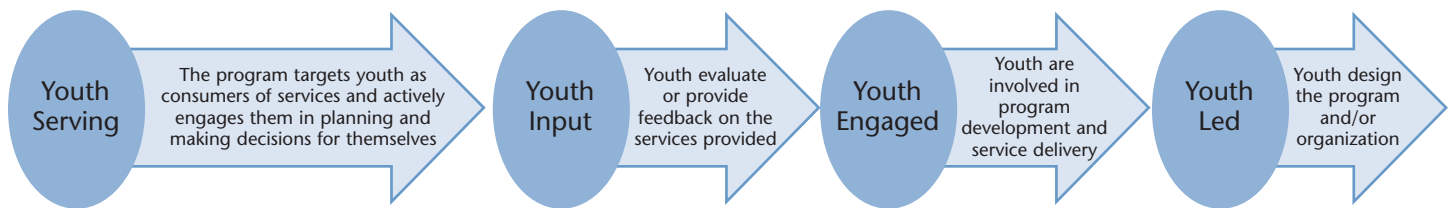
The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth examined outcomes for youth who lived in states with different foster care policies: youth in Iowa and Wisconsin who generally are discharged from foster care at age 18 (or age 19 at the latest) and youth in foster care in Illinois where young people may remain in care until they are 21 (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007). The study found that young people in Illinois in extended foster care were 3.5 times as likely to have completed a year of college than peers in Iowa and Wisconsin and were more likely to receive independent living services after age 19. The researchers also found that extending foster care may increase earnings and delay pregnancy. A study by Peters, Dworsky, Courtney and Pollack (2009) on the costs to government of extending foster care to age 21 found that the financial benefits of extending foster care—both for individual young people and for society—outweigh costs to government by a factor of approximately 2 to 1. Recognizing the developmental benefits to young people of extending foster care, Congress, in enacting The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, provided states with the opportunity to claim federal funds for support of young people in foster care beyond age 18. This provision will be discussed in greater depth later in this paper.

In summary, the first key learning that has emerged since the enactment of the Chafee Act in 1999 is the need to serve young people from a youth development perspective and a developmentally appropriate perspective, utilizing research on adolescent brain development and a positive youth development approach and applying the concept of “emerging adulthood.”

3) Youth must be engaged in their futures and in advocacy.

In 1999, the Chafee Act mandated that states ensure that young people in independent living programs participate directly in designing their own services and supports. That mandate brought attention to the importance of engaging youth in foster care in planning for their own futures, a practice that was not common at the time. Since 1999, the engagement of young people has emerged as best practice in meeting the needs of young people in and formerly in care. Youth engagement has been defined as “involving young people in the creation of their own destinies” and “genuinely involving them in case planning and encouraging them to advocate for themselves” (Stangler & Shirk, 2004, p. 260). “Youth engagement” has come to be understood as offering young people meaningful opportunities to take responsibility and leadership while working in partnership with caring adults who value, respect and share power with them (Ontario Trillium Foundation, n.d.). Agencies and organizations across the country are implementing a variety of approaches along a continuum that has proven useful in determining the actual level of youth engagement (See Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Continuum of Youth Engagement**



Sources: Ontario Trillium Foundation, n.d.; W.W. Kellogg Foundation, n.d.

Growing attention has been paid to the development and implementation of practices that support young people in actively engaging in planning for themselves and their futures and effectively advocating for policies and practices that promote positive outcomes for all young people in foster care.

“Youth development researchers have noted a shift in youth work in the past two decades from prevention...to preparation...from participation to power sharing (actively engaging young people as partners in organizational and public decision making).”  
*O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2003, p. 16-17.*

Over the past decade, child welfare agencies across the country have taken a variety of approaches to actively engaging young people in foster care in advocacy, public education and outreach, including annual conferences and summits that involve youth in the planning and as speakers, youth speakers bureaus, young people as mentors for children and youth in foster care, and formal youth advisory boards. At the national level, the recent formation of a Senate Caucus on Foster Youth will provide a way for young people currently or formerly in foster care to have their voices heard, make senators more aware of the issues that impact young people in foster care, generate ideas for preventing negative outcomes and create opportunities for success.

Developments at the national, state, and community levels have supported communities in fully engaging young people in planning for their futures and advocating for themselves and others. The Pew Charitable Trusts' Kids Are Waiting campaign worked collaboratively with FosterClub to leverage the voice and stories of young people to build the will to move key federal child welfare legislation forward. The young people were successful in engaging the support of Congressional members and through their efforts, gained insight about the importance of civic engagement and an understanding of federal policy and how it impacts the lives of children and youth in foster care (Connect for Kids, 2008). These efforts have blossomed at the state level as well as young people have become actively involved in state law and policy advocacy. In California, for example, the California Youth Connection, a powerful advocacy group comprised of young people currently or formerly in foster care, has been extremely effective in influencing state level policy decisions that impact children and youth in foster care. The National Governors Association Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning from Foster Care (2006) likewise has focused on meaningful youth engagement in the policy process and program development, bringing young advocates formerly in foster care to meetings with states to assist them in meaningfully engaging young people in policy advocacy and decision making.

The implementation of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's strategy of youth engagement in communities across the country has provided a rich environment for learning how to assist young people in developing skills and leadership techniques so that they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of program implementation and become advocates for themselves and others. A primary learning is that communities' Youth Leadership Boards are critical vehicles for creating meaningful roles for young people. In each community, a Youth Leadership Board is run by young people ages 14 through 23 who are in foster care or who have recently transitioned from foster care. The Youth Leadership Boards play an essential role in designing the Initiative activities at the local level and have several Initiative-specific missions:

- To advocate for greater responsiveness in the foster care system to the needs and desires of young people
- To develop new opportunities for young people, including the awarding of financial grants aimed at widening opportunities for young people in transition in their communities
- To help design and administer the Opportunity Passport™ (discussed later in this paper)

The Initiative and collaborating communities have reached other key learnings regarding youth engagement:

- Strategically engaged young people, with leadership from Youth Leadership Boards, are instrumental in achieving critical system change and policy improvements.
- Young people are effective advocates for their own cause, through direct advocacy with policy makers and funders.
- Communities and public systems must dramatically improve the way they perceive, interact with, and support young people. Of particular importance is the recognition that youth and young adults possess critical understanding of ways to help communities and public systems make those improvements and create the opportunities young people need to make a successful transition to adulthood.
- Simply "engaging" young people does not sufficiently harness their potential power. Communities and public systems must build authentic and effective partnerships that enable young people to become centrally involved.

**Research Findings on Youth Engagement as Members of Youth Leadership Boards**

- 76% of board members sustain their participation in Youth Leadership Boards despite busy schedules
- 84% of board members report participating in making decisions
- 71% of board members report deepening leadership capacity by attending skills training and presentations
- 63% of board members demonstrate leadership by conducting presentations and trainings

*Source: Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2008*

4) Independent living programs have not been successful in preparing young people in foster care for adulthood.

Prior to the enactment of the Chafee Act, the most comprehensive research on independent living services for youth in foster care was conducted by Westat (Westat 1988, 1991; Cook, 1994). These studies focused on ten general skill areas associated with independent living: money management, knowledge about health care, family planning, knowledge about continuing education, skills associated with employment, home management, social skills, obtaining housing, obtaining legal assistance, and finding community resources. The Westat researchers found that fewer than half of the youth in their study had received skill training in each of the skill areas, with the exception of money (55 percent), home (66 percent), and social skills (70 percent). The study did not evaluate the extent to which these services were effective in preparing young people for adulthood.

Since the enactment of the Chafee Act in 1999, several studies have examined the quality of independent living programs and the extent to which they achieve positive outcomes for young people (Dworsky, 2008). These studies make clear that in general, independent living services are not effectively meeting young people's needs.

- An evaluation of the life skills training offered to youth in foster care in Los Angeles County examined concrete measures of young people's transitions to adulthood, including education and employment (completion of a high school diploma or general equivalent diploma and current employment status); economic well-being (reported earnings, current net worth, economic hardship, and receipt of formal and informal assistance); housing (residential stability and homelessness); delinquency; pregnancy; receipt of needed documentation, such as a Social Security card; and financial resources (such as a saving account). The evaluation found few impacts on any outcome assessed. The researchers concluded that the life skills training had no significant positive impact on any of the concrete indicators of successful transition to adulthood (Courtney, Zinn, Zielewski, Bess, Malm, Stagner, & Pergamit, 2008).
- A study of independent living services in Idaho (Christenson, n.d.) found that the delivery of independent living services in the state was inconsistent and lacked core standards of practice. Other findings: there was under-reporting of outcomes for young people receiving independent living services and a greater focus on process-based evaluations; young people served through independent living programs experienced high rates of homelessness; and in some regions of the state, there was a five times higher pregnancy/birth rate among young women receiving independent living services than the state average.
- A Philadelphia study investigated the outcomes for young people who had aged out of foster care and become homeless. Among other goals, the study sought to (1) identify the types of services young people received and the planning process leading to their discharge from care and (2) identify strategies, strengths, weaknesses and gaps in services and planning for this group of young people. The researchers concluded that the system in its entirety failed to meet some of the key needs of the vast majority of the young people. The researchers further concluded that homeless young people who aged out of foster care faced significant barriers in living independently and experienced a poor quality of life (Meyers, White, Whalen, & DiLorenzo, 2007).
- In a Washington State study, researchers interviewed youth 15 to 18 years of age who were in foster care in 2007. Among the findings: only 49 percent of youth said that a social worker had referred them to an Independent Living or Transitional Living program, and only 33 percent of young people age 17 and a half or older said that they have ever been invited to a shared planning meeting to discuss their transition from foster care (Tarnai, & Krebill-Prather, 2008).

Studies also have asked young people formerly in foster care whether they believed that the independent living services they received prepared them for adulthood and life on their own. A qualitative study with a diverse sample of 27 young people currently and formerly in foster care in a Midwestern state found that although youth had hopeful expectations and plans for their futures, they had mixed opinions about the utilization and effectiveness of existing independent living programs (Petr, 2008). A Texas study involving interviews with young people formerly in foster care found that 75 percent rated their last placements as “helpful” in preparing them for adulthood and 15 percent rated their last placements as “extremely” or “somewhat” unhelpful. Young people stated that they needed more information in the areas of job skills, money management, housing and transportation, health education, getting a GED, and driver’s education (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2007). Another study examined transition services for incarcerated young people (Abrams, Shannon, & Sangalang, 2008). Researchers found that the young people viewed the transitional living program as having many benefits, particularly independent living skills training. However, young people in the community reported that the program lacked sufficient intensity to help them handle the types of challenges that emerged once they were on their own.

5) Young people currently and formerly in foster care need to build financial resources and assets.

An important Initiative strategy is to organize resources and create opportunities for young people leaving foster care through the Opportunity Passport™. The Opportunity Passport™ is a package of resources designed to help participants learn financial management; obtain experience with the banking system; save money for education, housing, health care, and other specified expenses; and gain streamlined access to opportunities, including education and training.

The Initiative has been the leader in bringing asset development for young people to the field of child welfare. Its work has been grounded in the recognition that asset building can bring about long-term benefits to young people irrespective of socioeconomic background (Destin, 2009). The Initiative’s work builds on research that suggests that a set of outcomes can be expected to be achieved through asset accumulation by individuals with limited resources: greater future orientation, increased personal efficacy, enhanced personal security, and increased financial literacy (Sherraden, 1990, 1991; Scanlon, 2001). A recent study involving interviews with young people ages 14 to 19 who participated in a savings account program found that they perceived psychological, behavioral, and social benefits through participation in a savings program. They described benefits in the areas of future orientation, view of self, sense of security and financial knowledge. In addition, young people stated that savings participation had a positive impact on fiscal prudence (Scanlon & Adams, 2009).

“Making financial education and asset-building programs available to youth in foster care and those transitioning from care is essential to helping these young people become productive adults.”

*The Finance Project, 2007*

The Initiative has built on this knowledge base and applied it to the needs of young people in foster care and those who have exited the foster care system. The Initiative’s work has made clear that young people who exit foster care too often make the transition to adulthood without the parental and familial supports most other young people take for granted. In many cases, they face uncertain access to health care, limited educational choices, difficulty finding affordable housing, and a lack of experience navigating the world of work. Too few have the financial resources or know how these resources might help them obtain needed services. In a recent study, fewer than half of the states (44.4%) that completed a survey reported that young people in their foster care systems accumulate assets in any way, and fewer than one-third of the states in which a young person in foster care could accumulate assets through a matched savings account reported that young people actually do so (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009).

The Initiative has made significant strides working in collaboration with communities across the country to implement the Opportunity Passport™. In fact, young people enrolled in the Opportunity Passport™ are saving and buying assets at rates comparable to the American Dream Demonstration (ADD), the forerunner of Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) in the United States. The Opportunity Passport™ participants are saving and buying assets at these rates despite being an average age of 18, compared to the average age of 36 for ADD participants.



**Table 4. Opportunity Passport™ Participants Match Well Against the American Dream Demonstration (ADD)**

|                                 | <b>Opportunity Passport™ Participants</b> | <b>ADD Sample</b>                 |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Percent with Match Withdrawn    | 35%                                       | 32%                               |
| Total Dollars Deposited         | \$3,108,407                               | \$2,530,538                       |
| Average deposit per participant | \$1,018                                   | \$1070                            |
| Sample size                     | 3,052 participants in 10 sites            | 2,364 participants in 14 programs |

6) Data must be available to track outcomes and drive decisions in communities and states.

The body of quantitative and qualitative data on outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care has grown significantly over the past decade. As discussed earlier, studies have documented a range of troubling outcomes for young people who leave care, including: poor educational outcomes (Courtney, et al., 2007; EPE Research Center, 2006; Pecora, et al., 2006); high rates of underemployment and unemployment and greater reliance on public assistance (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Dworsky & Courtney, 2000; Courtney, et al., 2007); significant rates of homelessness (Pecora, et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003); mental and physical health problems (Pecora, et al., 2006; Bilaver & Courtney, 2006); greater likelihood of pregnancy by age 19 for young women who leave foster care at age 18 (Courtney, et al., 2007); and greater likelihood of entering the criminal justice system (Reilly, 2003). At the same time, interviews with young adults formerly in foster care have demonstrated the very human side of these young people’s experiences. Shirk and Stangler (2004), in their book, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System*, provide the compelling stories of ten young people who detail the economic and social barriers stemming from the many disruptions they experienced in foster care. The stories portray largely unhappy endings of sudden homelessness, unemployment, dead-end jobs, loneliness, and despair.

This and other documentation of the struggles of young people in foster care and exiting foster care have heightened the focus on clearly and methodically tracking outcomes for these young people. Increasingly, data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and other multi-state data sets at the federal and state levels are being used to track outcomes for these young people. At the same time, these data are being used at the local level to inform communities’ efforts to plan for and with young people in care (see Flynn-Khan & Bhat, 2008; Leventhal, Brooks-Gunn, Swisher, Whitlock, Powers, Zeldin, & Petrokubi, 2008). The Institute for Child and Family Policy at the University of Maine (n.d.) and the University of Kansas School of Social Work (2002), among others, have developed a range of tools to assist states and communities develop data systems to track permanency, well-being and safety outcomes for youth in foster care. The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) holds promise to provide significant data on outcomes for young people who leave foster care at age 18 and older.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative’s research, evaluation and communications strategy focuses on documenting results and identifying and disseminating evidence-based and promising practices. The Initiative and collaborating communities have reached five important conclusions:

- Data must be collected and used to guide decision making, measure the degree to which outcomes for youth and young adults are improving, and develop the public will needed to support young people’s successful transitions to adulthood.
- It is essential to build on existing capacity to collect, analyze and communicate data.
- Powerful communications campaigns require that communities and agencies develop or strengthen their ability to use qualitative and quantitative data.
- Communications strategies must present clear messages and a compelling case. Multi-media descriptions of the issues that include possible solutions are particularly effective.
- It is important to keep the focus on a definable set of issues. Messages need to consistently refer to a distinct, limited population with understandable needs and communicate that the needs of this defined population can be met effectively.



7) Partnerships and resources are essential in achieving positive outcomes for young people currently or formerly in foster care.

Over the past decade, partnerships and resources have been recognized as vital to achieving positive outcomes of young people currently or formerly in foster care. The experiences of successful partnership leaders at the national, state, and local levels have informed the development of effective strategies for establishing and sustaining public-private partnerships designed to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for young people (Relave & Deich, 2007). Particular attention has been given to developing public-public partnerships between child welfare agencies and the juvenile courts (Louisell, 2006a) and between child welfare agencies and group homes on youth permanency issues (Louisell, 2006b). Attention likewise has focused on the financial resources that are needed to support permanence for young people (The Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services, 2008).

A strategy of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is to work with communities to bring together key local and state level decision-makers and others with influence who will take responsibility for leveraging the public and private resources needed to provide increased opportunities for young people in foster care. Each site has a Community Partnership Board comprised of members who are influential in each of the Initiative's five strategies and who have the credibility to bring resources to the table, such as representatives of local banks, nonprofit organizations, state agencies and businesses. Based on experience implementing the Partnerships and Resources strategy, the Initiative and collaborating communities have learned:

- In every community, partnerships have been critical to success. These partnerships involve young people in selecting partners and emphasize sustainability from the start.
- The public child welfare agency is an essential partner in the work.
- Leverage is created by a shared effort to bring participants – including non-profits, universities, state agencies, youth and others – together.
- It is vital to build on the strengths of partners, reaching out to key actors and focusing policy advocacy where the greatest opportunities can be found.
- Partners are needed who can read the environment in which they are working and use the Initiative's five strategies to respond to opportunities and challenges.
- To be most successful, it is important to bring together partners with the ability to promote and develop strategies for sustaining change by influencing public policy, funding, and practices in child welfare, employment, education, housing, health and banking.

8) Public policy and public will are critical elements in effectively serving youth currently and formerly in foster care.

Over the past decade, it has become clearer that permanence for young people will become a reality when the public fully appreciates that all young people need a family to thrive and when legislative and administrative policies support that vision (Casey Family Services, 2008). A number of initiatives and efforts have identified public policy and public will as critical to positive outcomes for young people in or formerly in foster care. The California Blue Ribbon Commission (2008, p. 4) outlined a number of improvements needed in the state's child welfare system and emphasized that it was vital to "find the public will and resources to get the job done." The National Foster Care Coalition (2009) focuses on improving foster care for young people through political and public will building.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities' Initiative uses strategies to ensure that public and private systems are responsive and effective and that the public understands and supports the work involved in effectively serving young people currently and formerly in foster care. A key learning is that changing the policies, practices, and funding patterns of multiple systems is challenging, but this work is one of the most effective ways to help youth and young adults to achieve independence, economic success and permanent and stable relationships. A significant number of the communities with which the Initiative is collaborating have experienced great success in influencing public will and policy (see Table 5 on following page).

Table 5. Initiative Sites’ Successes in Advocating for Policy Improvements

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <p><b>Medicaid</b></p>         | <p>Connecticut, Iowa, and Michigan automatically transfer 18 year olds in foster care into the state Medicaid systems. In Georgia, Florida, and Colorado, young adults now have Medicaid eligibility to age 21.</p>  |
| <p><b>Permanence</b></p>       | <p>In Maine, the Office and Child and Family Services developed its first permanency policy working in conjunction with young people.</p> <p>Iowa has developed the Iowa Youth Dream Team youth-centered planning model to identify permanent connections for youth in foster care and create youth-directed transition plans.</p> <p>Colorado, Iowa and Maine have improved and expanded sibling visitation rights.</p> <p>Michigan is piloting a new youth service delivery model featuring youth-driven teaming to define and achieve goals for permanency and preparation for adult living.</p>  |
| <p><b>Education</b></p>        | <p>Georgia offers post-secondary scholarships to youth formerly in foster care.</p> <p>Maine offers tuition waivers to young adults who are in care or have been adopted.</p> <p>Education planners in Michigan and Florida have helped ensure that youth remain in the schools they attended when they entered foster care.</p> <p>In Northern Michigan, education planners dramatically increased enrollments in post-secondary education, which resulted in education planner positions being added statewide.</p> <p>Iowa provides expanded financial assistance to cover the costs of college for any young person who ages out of foster care (or adopted if over 16) at any in-state public or private university or two-year college up to full cost after other financial aid is applied.</p> |
| <p><b>Child Welfare</b></p>    | <p>Georgia, Iowa, Rhode Island, Maine and Florida have made court improvements to better serve young people in foster care.</p> <p>Tennessee passed legislation to set up the Independent Living Services oversight committee to ensure that services are being delivered in a way that makes sense for young people.</p> <p>In Iowa, Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) legislation extended support for youth leaving foster care to age 21, including a \$2.9 million annual state appropriation.</p> <p>In Maine, young people worked with the child welfare agency to develop and ratify the Bill of Rights for Maine Youth in Care.</p>  |
| <p><b>Leverage Funding</b></p> | <p>Georgia’s Department of Human Services supports funding for Individual Development Accounts (IDAs).</p> <p>Michigan’s Department of Human Services allocates Chafee dollars to support youth IDAs and other Initiative strategies.</p>  |

9) Court involvement is crucial to achieving and monitoring positive outcomes for young people in foster care.

Courts have long played a critical decision-making role in child welfare cases. Over the past decade, however, greater attention has been brought to the court's unique role in promoting positive outcomes for young people in foster care. The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care (2004) conducted a comprehensive assessment of the foster care system and determined that reform in two areas would have a far-reaching impact in achieving positive outcomes for children and youth: reform of the federal child welfare financing structure and support for a court system that has sufficient tools, information, and accountability necessary to meet children's and youth's needs for safety, well-being and permanence. The Pew Commission's court recommendations (see accompanying text box) focused not only on court data, court-agency collaboration, and judicial leadership, but on ensuring that young people and parents have a strong voice in court hearings – through participation in court proceedings and through well-trained and qualified attorneys, guardians ad litem, and CASA volunteers.

**Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care: Court Recommendations**

- Adoption of court performance measures by every dependency court to ensure that they can track and analyze their caseloads, increase accountability for improved outcomes for children, and inform decisions about the allocation of court resources.
- Incentives and requirements for effective collaboration between courts and child welfare agencies on behalf of children in foster care.
- A strong voice for children and parents in court and effective representation by better trained attorneys and volunteer advocates.
- Leadership from Chief Justices and other state court leaders in organizing their court systems to better serve children, provide training for judges, and promote more effective standards for dependency courts, judges, and attorneys.

*Source: Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2004*

Following the Pew Commission's recommendations on strengthening the voices of youth in their court proceedings, greater attention focused on youth's active participation in their court proceedings. The American Bar Association Youth at Risk Initiative (2006) took note of the Pew Commission's findings that juvenile and family courts often do not assure that young people play a meaningful role in their judicial proceedings and that, in fact, they sometimes discourage young people's active in-court participation. The Youth at Risk Initiative stated that lawyers should examine how they can promote meaningful involvement of young people in all hearings affecting them, so that court proceedings become a positive participatory experience for vulnerable youth in dependency hearings and other cases.

Youth led organizations across the country have developed guidelines to promote young people's involvement in their court hearings (see County of Sacramento, n.d.), and bills of rights of youth in foster care have been developed that include "the right to attend my court hearing and speak to the judge" (see Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, n.d.). A growing number of states have developed guides to the court system for youth in foster care to support them in actively participating in decision-making and having a say in their lives. Examples include *Getting From Here to There: A Guide to The Dependency Court For Children and Youth in Foster Care*, developed by the Children's Action Alliance in Arizona (2007); *Stand Up Stand Out: Recommendations to Improve Youth Participation in New York City's Permanency Planning Process*, written by the Center for Court Innovation Youth Justice Board (2007) and focused on young people's participation in their court hearings; and the *Texas Foster Care Handbook for Youth*, jointly developed by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and the Department's Youth Leadership Committee (n.d.).

At the same time, there has been a growing recognition of the court as a powerful entity for achieving positive outcomes for young people in foster care because of the court's ability to provide effective oversight and enforcement; coordinate service systems on behalf of young people; and ensure their central involvement in the planning process (Buss, et al., 2008). There is growing recognition of the role of the court in creating and enforcing deadlines for permanency planning and the provision of services to prepare young people for adulthood. Some states have enacted legislation and court rules to improve the court's monitoring of youth's cases (Buss, et al., 2008). Courts likewise have proven uniquely able to engage other service systems on behalf of young people in foster care, whether expressly authorized to do so through statute or through creative use of more conventional court tools (Buss, et al, 2008). Finally, there is a growing recognition that courts can play a critical role in facilitating young people's engagement in planning for their futures (see accompanying text box).

### What a Judge Can Do To Promote Youth Engagement

- A judge can require a young person to be present or compel a child welfare agency to help a young person get to court.
- A judge can amplify the young person's voice in the planning process by structuring hearings to give prominent attention to his or her views and questions.
- A judge can compel actions in support of a young person's plan that a child welfare agency might not take on its own initiative.

*Source: Buss, et al., 2008, p. 74*

10) The leveraging of finances and ideas is key to positive outcomes for young people currently and formerly in foster care.

Over the past decade, the need to leverage financing and ideas has become more critical. The Forum for Youth Investment (2005), for example, has focused on how children's and youth's services budgets can be used to leverage action. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative has learned much about the critical role of leveraging in bringing about positive outcomes for young people as they transition to adulthood. The Initiative and collaborating communities have found that it is essential to leverage funds and ideas.

### Financial Leverage or Impact

The Initiative has examined and measured the degree of leverage that communities produce. A key area of this examination has been the degree of financial leverage achieved. Posing the question, "How many additional dollars are now devoted to the goals we have set out as a result of our actions?," the Initiative found a remarkable 6:1 ratio – six dollars invested by the community for each dollar invested by the Initiative. With a \$3.9 million Initiative investment in the communities that have received funds directly from the Initiative, there is an estimated leverage of \$23,775,000 (Cornerstone Consulting, 2008). This figure is likely an underestimate of the real leverage impact in these communities given the substantial changes in the allocation of public funds and long term improvements in those communities that will pay dividends long after Initiative grants have ended. A critical lesson learned through this analysis is the powerful role of public dollars in serving young people in or leaving state care: "the big money, with longer term staying power, is the public funds" (Cornerstone Consulting, 2008, p. 7).

### Leveraging Ideas

The Initiative also has assessed the extent to which its work and the work of collaborating communities have influenced thinking and practice, particularly concerning how services and assistance to youth are delivered. The investments of time, expertise, vision and money by the Initiative and the collaborating communities have caused, enhanced, or accelerated improvements in awareness and perceptions about young people who age out of care and the services and supports they need to be successful. Through the Initiative's visits to communities and reviews of progress and other reports of the sites, it is clear that the efforts of the collaborating communities have raised awareness of these issues, had a direct and positive influence on large numbers of young people, and had significant influence on state and local policies.

## A Vision for The Next Decade

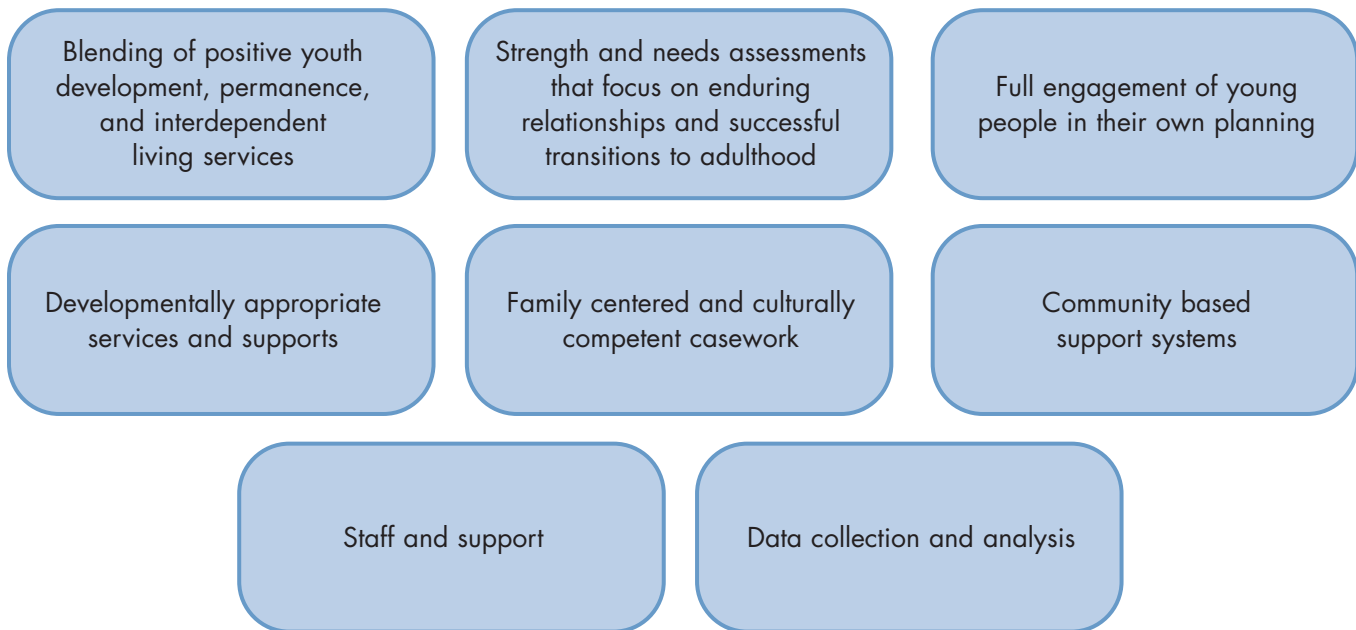
The vision expressed ten years ago in the Chafee legislation was “independence at 18.” The legislation took note of the vulnerability of young people leaving foster care and sought to provide them with some of the tools they would need to be successful adults. As we have discussed, however, much has been learned about how to successfully prepare young people in foster care to transition into adulthood. As we move into the next decade, that knowledge provides the foundation for a new vision of effectively preparing young people in foster care to be “connected by 25.” The path to achieving this new vision has two critical components:

- A system for the delivery of services and supports that promote the successful transitions of young people in foster care to adulthood.
- Policies that fully implement the opportunities made available by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, and other federal laws and state laws.

### An Effective Service System

As the next decade unfolds, young people currently and formerly in foster care need to be served by a new and different system that incorporates the learning of the past decade. What would this service system look like and do? Figure 4 summarizes the key characteristics of a service system that truly serves young people currently and formerly in foster care.

**Figure 4. An Effective Service System for Youth Currently and Formerly in Foster Care**



An effective service system for youth currently and formerly in foster care focuses on safety, permanence and well-being and:

**Blends youth development, permanence, and the provision of interdependent living services.** The service system for young people in foster care integrates connections to permanent family relationships with the life skills training that young people need to manage adult life. The service system simultaneously pursues permanence and preparation for adulthood for each young person in foster care. Specifically:

- Young people have opportunities to connect with parents; connect with relatives who can be “parents” for youth when their birth parents are unable or unwilling to do so; maintain relationships with or re-connect with siblings; and have permanent families through adoption. The service system is driven by the recognition that continuity and stability provide the foundation for youth people’s success in life. The goal is that each young person is part of a safe, stable, and functional family.

- Funds under the Chafee Act are used to help young people build strong relationships with adults and peers, participate in structured activities specific to their interests, and develop a broad and diverse network of social support.
- Young people have opportunities to develop leadership skills and community involvement, including opportunities for advising systems partners on policy and practice.
- The service system provides life skills training that is connected to families and communities and is relevant to the exigencies of the economy.
- Youth in foster care receive financial literacy and management training that includes:
  - *Opportunities to accumulate assets that will promote self-sufficiency*
  - *Connection with the mainstream banking system*
  - *Connection of savings/asset accumulation to the ability of young people to continue in school, take advantage of jobs outside their immediate neighborhood, and secure a place to live.*
- The service system has solid connections with education agencies to promote positive educational outcomes and reduce education disruption and dropout rates.
- The service system has solid connections with local employers, provides summer jobs for youth in foster care during their teenage years, ensures that group home rules allow for employment, and connects youth with adequate employment when they leave care.

**Bases strengths and needs assessments on young people's ability to build and preserve positive, enduring relationships and make successful transitions to adulthood.** Specifically:

- Assessments capture young people's underlying needs and not merely the behavioral symptoms.
- Youth development is considered holistically through assessing the strengths and challenges in a young person's family and community support system.
- Initial assessments gauge each young person's emotional, social, physical, vocational and educational development status compared to other youth of the same age.
- All youth ages 14 and older are evaluated across the factors that predict youth success.
- When a young person is found to be developmentally deficient in one or more areas, targeted services are provided to accelerate development.

**Engages young people in formulating a plan that includes the goals they wish to achieve by age 25.** Specifically, the service system ensures that:

- Young people are fully engaged in their own case planning as early as is developmentally appropriate.
- Young people lead the development of their case planning, including permanency planning and transition planning that addresses education and employment goals.
- Case planning focuses on permanent family connections.
- Case planning focuses on goals for adulthood, the specific steps that must be taken to achieve those goals, and who will support the young person in achieving those goals.

**Fully utilizes developmentally appropriate supports and interventions to produce better outcomes for youth**

**Provides family centered and culturally competent casework and planning, engagement skills, strengths-based approaches, and team decision making to achieve timely permanence**

**Provides services to meet families' challenges, including therapeutic and other behavioral health services, substance abuse treatment services, housing and other services they need to support the youth's transition to adulthood**

**Connects young people and families with community-based support systems, including civic and faith-based organizations**



**Develops community resources that are able to support young people throughout their transitions to adulthood**

**Fully prepares and supports staff to understand the value of family relationships and to develop skills at working with young people to support permanent connects and their transitions to adulthood**

**Collects and analyzes data to assess service system efficacy and guide the development of new service delivery approaches**

## Strong Policies that Support Youth in Successfully Transitioning to Adulthood

The vision for the next decade incorporates the development and implementation of a range of policies that promote the successful transition of young people currently and formerly in foster care to adulthood by age 25. These policies maximize youth's opportunities under the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections), and other federal laws. They are embedded in state law and policy.

Those policies fully implement provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in the following ways:

- All youth in foster care, including young people in foster care beyond the age of 18, have a permanency plan and case reviews.
- The case plans of all youth ages 14 and older (expanding on the ASFA requirement pertaining to youth age 16 and older) include a description of the programs and services that will help the youth prepare for the transition to independent living and are consistently updated over time.
- At each permanency hearing for all youth ages 14 and older (expanding on the ASFA requirement pertaining to youth age 16 and older), the court considers the services needed to assist the young person in making the transition from foster care to adulthood.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act provides rich opportunities for young people currently and formerly in foster care to succeed as adults by age 25. Over the next decade, the vision is that states and localities fully implement these provisions to help ensure that young people successfully transition to adulthood with permanent families and the life skills they need. The critical elements of the vision for the next decade with respect to the opportunities available through the Fostering Connections Act are:

### **Older youth have permanent family relationships**

- Fostering Connections permits states to claim open ended federal reimbursement for kinship guardianship assistance provided for eligible children and youth who leave foster care to guardianship with a relative. This new opportunity was created following states' experiments providing subsidized guardianships to kin. Evaluations of those programs showed that guardianship subsidies increased the number of children leaving foster care to permanent families and that children placed in subsidized guardianship settings fared as well – if not better – than children placed with other types of permanent families (Stoltz, 2008). The vision for the next decade is that every state implements the kinship guardianship assistance option to expand permanency opportunities for young people.
- The new law strengthens children's and youth's connections with their families in other important ways. In the next decade, the vision is that all state and localities implement these policies to further expand the opportunities for family permanence for youth in care:
  - *Within 30 days of removing a child or youth from the custody of parents, all states and localities routinely exercise due diligence to identify grandparents and other adult relatives of the child/youth and notify them of the removal and the relatives' options for participating in caring for the child, including information about being licensed as a foster family and guardianship assistance.*
  - *All states have processes and procedures in place to waive non-safety licensing requirements for a relative caregiver on a case-by-case basis and for a specific child.*

- The new law expands the availability of adoption assistance for children and youth adopted from the foster care system. The income tests for eligibility for federal adoption assistance will be phased out over time. Beginning in 2010, income tests will be eliminated for young people who are ages 16 or older when their adoption assistance agreements are finalized; children who have been in foster care for 60 continuous months; and any sibling of any child who is eligible under the revised rules. The income eligibility requirement will be phased out for all children who otherwise are eligible for federal adoption assistance over an eight-year period. Over the next decade, as more and more youth are eligible for federal financial assistance without regard to the income test, the vision is that states will promote this benefit for young people who are adopted and their families and ensure that youth and families know that federally supported adoption assistance is available along with the Medicaid coverage that accompanies it.

### **Youth receive preparation for adulthood services after they have left foster care to permanent families**

The Fostering Connections Act expands the Chafee Act by extending Chafee funded services to youth who leave foster care at age 16 or older to guardianship (youth who leave foster care at age 16 or older to adoption were already eligible). The Act further extends eligibility for the Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) to youth who leave foster care to guardianship, adding this group to those who leave to adoption after their 16th birthdays. These provisions further advance the vision of blending youth development, permanence, and the provision of interdependent living services in the next decade. It is envisioned that all states will fully implement these provisions and use their experience to expand further the integration of permanence and preparation for adulthood services.

### **Youth are allowed to remain in foster care to age 21 with federal support**

The Fostering Connections Act provides states with the option of extending foster care to age 21 with federal support. The law allows young people to remain in care beyond their 18th birthday provided that:

- They have not reached their 21st birthday; and
- They are either enrolled in school, employed at least 80 hours a month, or participating in an activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment (states may waive this requirement if a young person has a medical condition making him or her incapable of participating in these activities).

The law also allows states to continue to support young people in foster care ages 18 and older who are living independently in a supervised setting.

As the second decade following the enactment of the Chafee Act commences, the vision is that all states take the option of extending foster care to age 21. During this extension of care, states and localities work diligently with young people to ensure that they have permanent family connections and are well prepared to transition to adulthood.

### **Youth's transitions from foster care are carefully planned**

The Fostering Connections Act requires that states have procedures as part of their mandatory case review systems through which caseworkers work with youth to develop a transition plan no earlier than 90 days before the youth's 18th birthday, or at whatever later age that the state chooses to end foster care assistance. The law recognizes that young people are more focused on planning for their futures during the 90 days before they leave foster care. The plan must address specific options for the young person regarding housing, health insurance, education, local opportunities for mentors and continuing support services, and workforce supports and employment services. The law specifically requires the full engagement of young people in this planning by requiring that each transition plan be "personalized at the direction of the child."

The vision for the next decade is that transition planning, involving both permanent family connections and preparation for adulthood, begins at age 14 and continues throughout the young person's stay in foster care. It is envisioned that a growing number of youth exit foster care to permanent families and their transition plans focus on preparation for adulthood and the family's role in that preparation. Further, the vision is that those young people who leave foster care at age 18 or older have clear, complete transition plans which they have developed with caseworkers and other adults.

## **Youth in foster care achieve their educational goals**

The Fostering Connections Act focuses on education stability and enrollment for all children and youth in foster care. Under the new law:

- State child welfare agencies must work with state and local education agencies to ensure that children and youth remain in the same school in which they were enrolled at the time they entered foster care. If remaining in the same school is not in the child's or youth's best interests, the child welfare and education agencies must ensure immediate and appropriate enrollment in a new school.
- States may claim federal funding for the cost of transporting children and youth to their "schools of origin".
- States must assure that children who have reached the minimum age for mandatory school attendance in their state and are receiving federal foster care, adoption assistance or kinship guardianship assistance are enrolled in school or have completed high school.

The Fostering Connections Act sets a new standard for educational stability and continuity for children and youth in foster care. The vision for the next decade is that state and local child welfare and educational agencies collaborate to promote positive educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care. Rates of high school completion for young people in foster care or who have exited foster care will substantially increase, meeting that of the general population of youth in the United States. The number of young people formerly in foster care who complete a college education will meet that of the general population of young adults in the country.

## **Youth in foster care are physically and emotionally healthy**

The Fostering Connections Act requires that each state develop a coordinated strategy and oversight plan to ensure that all children and youth in foster care have access to health care, including mental health services and dental care. The law requires that this strategy outline:

- A schedule for initial and follow up health screens
- How the health needs identified by the screens will be monitored and treated
- How medical information on children and youth in care will be updated and appropriately shared
- Steps to ensure continuity of health care services
- Oversight of prescription medications

As the second decade following the enactment of the Chafee Act unfolds, the vision is that young people in foster care and those that leave foster care are physically and emotionally healthy and have access to preventive, primary, secondary, specialized, and emergency health care that they need. To that end, the vision is that:

- All states extend Medicaid coverage through age 21 to young people who leave care to live on their own
- All young people have a plan for accessing health care prior to leaving foster care
- All young people in care have access to their medical files/records and health history prior to discharge from foster care
- Young people who have chronic health conditions receive specialized supports
- Young people are empowered to become their own best health care advocates and become involved in the broader health care debate on behalf of youth in foster care
- The vision for the next decade also incorporates a full maximization of other opportunities under federal law to ensure that young people currently and formerly in foster care successfully transition to adulthood by age 25. Specifically:

**The National Youth in Transition Database Plus is fully implemented to learn from young people how they are doing after leaving foster care so that policy and practice can be improved.**

The National Youth in Transition Database outcome measures will provide much needed information about young people aging out of foster care, but they are fairly limited in terms of breadth and depth. Of particular concern is the lack of attention paid to relationships with family members and other supportive adults. In order to gather the most robust information possible to understand how young people are faring and how their provision of Chafee-funded services might be improved, additional data will be needed. The American Public Human Services Association and Chapin Hall Center at the University of Chicago have developed an enhanced survey instrument that states can use not only to meet the federal data collection requirements but also to collect additional information about the experiences of young people across a variety of domains – information that will help states improve the services and supports they currently provide. This survey instrument is called the NYTD Plus (Dworsky & Crayton, 2009).

**Youth in foster care and young adults formerly in care receive financial and other support to attend and complete college**

As of July 2009, the College Cost Reduction Act allows certain youth who have been in foster care to claim independent status when applying for federal financial aid. An “independent student” includes any child “who is an orphan, in foster care, or a ward of the court at any time when the individual is 13 years of age or older” or “is an emancipated minor or is in legal guardianship as determined by a court of competent jurisdiction in the individual’s state of legal residence.” Students who claim independent status are typically able to access greater federal education assistance because they are exempt from including information about income and assets from their parents (Fernandez, 2008). The vision is that states provide young people currently and formerly in foster care with information about and support to take advantage of the benefits of the College Cost Reduction Act.

**Youth in foster care and young adults formerly in foster care obtain job training and ongoing support**

Youth in foster care and young adults formerly in care can benefit from Workforce Investment Act Programs that offer job training to unemployed and underemployed individuals through the Department of Labor. Two programs – the Youth Activities program and Job Corps – provide job training and related services to targeted low-income vulnerable populations, including youth currently and formerly in foster care. These young people may participate in the Youth Activities program if they are ages 14 to 21 and may participate in Job Corps if they are ages 16 to 24.

The Workforce Investment Act also authorized pilot Foster Youth Workforce Demonstration Projects in five states with the largest foster care populations (California, Illinois, Minnesota, New York and Texas). These projects, which began in 2005, have provided important information about strengthening workforce programs for young people which can guide programs over the next decade: the importance of addressing young people’s mental health needs, literacy levels, and anger management issues when providing job training; the importance of strong collaborations between child welfare agencies and workforce investment boards and other agencies; and the vital role of social workers in the lives of youth (Fernandez, 2008). Research confirms that early connection to the labor force in high school, through summer and part time jobs and internships, is the strongest predictor of employment at 24 (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009).

It is envisioned that states will maximize the opportunities of young people currently and formerly in foster care to participate in Workforce Investment Act and other employment programs with particular emphasis on labor force involvement in high school. It is further envisioned that states will support young people’s participation in these programs through services designed to meet their mental health, literacy, anger management, and relationship needs.

**Youth who leave foster care have safe, affordable housing**

In the next decade, full advantage should be taken of federally supported housing opportunities for young people currently and formerly in foster care. These youth may be eligible for housing under the Family Unification Vouchers that make housing available to youth ages 18 to 21 who left foster care at age 16 or older. Young people are eligible for these vouchers for up to 18 months. Young people currently or formerly in foster care also may be eligible for housing and related services through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program. It is envisioned that states will ensure that each young person who leaves foster care has safe, affordable housing through maximizing the resources available through the Chafee Act, other federal housing programs, and state resources.

### **Meeting the Housing Needs of Young People Currently and Formerly in Foster Care: A Current Snapshot**

- Most states use at least some of their Chafee funds for housing.
- Nearly two-thirds of states that use their Chafee funds for room and board do so exclusively for young people formerly in foster care.
- Only a percentage of states report using either the Family Unification Program (27.3%) or priority access to Section 8 vouchers (20.5%) for young people in foster care.
- 41% of states report providing housing assistance through some other programs: transitional housing, housing subsidies, and other housing assistance.

*(Dworksy & Havilcek, 2009)*

Finally, the vision for the next decade incorporates the maximization of opportunities for youth in foster care at the state policy level. The vision is that each state will implement policy and practice in the following areas:

#### **Permanence**

- Mandates that all young people leave foster care with a family connections or are discharged to a relative or a committed, caring adult that they have identified
- Provides young people with options for re-engaging birth parents or relatives who are safe resources

#### **Financial Supports**

- Makes Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) available for all youth currently and formerly in foster care who are ages 14 to 24, with developmentally appropriate financial literacy training and the ability to make purchases such as vehicles and place security deposits on housing

#### **Education**

- Make tuition waivers to public and private schools available to young people formerly in foster care up to age 21
- Provide other supports for post-secondary education, such as books, computers, school supplies and housing

#### **Health Care**

- Takes the option to extend Medicaid coverage to young people to age 21 who age out of foster care with automatic enrollment and re-enrollment in Medicaid on an annual basis
- Ensures coordination of Medicaid beyond age 21 for those meeting the requirements for adult Medicaid eligibility

#### **Housing**

- Expands state funded housing programs, recognizing that 30% of Chafee dollars is not adequate to meet the need on its own

#### **Other Supports**

- Mandates that all young people leaving foster care ages 14 through 21 receive necessary documents upon exiting, including, at minimum, their Social Security card, a certified birth certificate or green card, and a government-issued photo ID

#### **Improved Outcomes for Youth of Color**

- Trains staff on issues of racial equity and focuses practice on improving outcomes for youth of color
- Collects and analyzes outcome and administrative data to identify racial disproportionality and acts to assure that services provided are racially and ethnically equitable, free of bias, and provided by culturally competent staff

## Conclusion

The tenth anniversary of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act provides the opportunity to assess the impact of this legislation on young people in foster care. Much has been learned over the past ten years that has enriched the understanding of what young people who are currently or were formerly in foster care need and how they can best be served. This paper outlines a vision for the next decade in which all young people currently and formerly in foster care are “connected by 25.” It describes the two components essential to achieving that vision: an effective service system and strong federal and state policies that ensure that young people currently and formerly in foster care have permanent family relationships and are prepared to succeed as adults.

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NOTES:



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