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**TO:** State, Tribal and Territorial Agencies Administering or Supervising the Administration of Title IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act; State Foster Care and Independent Living and Education and Training Voucher Coordinators.

**SUBJECT:** Best practices for serving young people transitioning from foster care.

**LEGAL AND RELATED:** Titles IV-E and IV-B of the Social Security Act (the Act); Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Public Law (P.L.) 110-351); and the Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123).

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this Information Memorandum (IM) is to provide information on best practices for providing quality programs and services to young people who are preparing to transition out of the foster care system.

**INTRODUCTION:** The Children’s Bureau (CB) is committed to ensuring that youth leave foster care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports, and opportunities. To achieve that goal, we recognize that federal, state, local, and community-based organizations must partner with and learn from people with lived expertise when designing programs and policies, and supportive services. This IM was developed in partnership with young people with lived experience in the foster care system.

**BACKGROUND:**

To promote positive development and prepare for adulthood, all young people need safe, stable, and nurturing homes and environments; positive relationships; and connections to caring adults. Yet, too often, young people in foster care encounter numerous age-related challenges to legal and relational permanency and well-being.

In recent years, progress has been made to expand permanency options and increase the number of children who leave foster care to reunification, guardianship, and adoption. However, in fiscal

year 2022, approximately 18,500 young people left foster care without achieving legal permanency, due to age.<sup>1</sup>

Since October 1, 2010, title IV-E agencies have had the option under the title IV-E Foster Care program to provide extended foster care to eligible young people ages 18 – 20. Eligibility criteria include that the young person be in school, working or in job training, or have a medical condition that prevents them from participating in these activities. When transition-age young people remain in foster care past their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, title IV-E agencies have additional time to partner with them and provide support in preparing for the transition to adulthood. Having this additional time in foster care allows a young person to continue to make important connections with caring peers, adults, organizations, and communities.

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (the Chafee program) is another key source of support for young people in transition from foster care. This program provides federal funding to title IV-E agencies to help young people with the services and supports they need during this time. Under the program, all title IV-E agencies may provide services to young people up to age 21. In addition, if the title IV-E agency offers extended foster care to young people through age 21, the agency may elect to use Chafee program funds to serve young people up to age to 23. For young people, especially those exiting foster care without legal permanency, services funded by the Chafee program can be critical to helping them thrive.

CB, in partnership with the ACF Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), continues to support rigorous evaluation to strengthen the knowledge base about which services, supports, resources, and practices best support young people in the transition from foster care. While evidence from rigorous evaluations continues to be built, we recognize that there are best practices widely regarded as helpful in meeting the developmental needs of young people in or transitioning out of the foster care system. Some of these best practices, informed by research and lived experiences of young people in or formerly in foster care, are outlined below.

### *Part 1: Ensure Young People Leave Care with Strengthened Relationships and Connections*

#### Build and Nurture Relationships

Fundamentally, healthy relationships are vital to the well-being of all people. Nurturing healthy relationships is important for young people who have experienced the child welfare system, particularly given the trauma, loss and grief experienced. Organizations and individuals working with young people must be intentional in helping them establish close relationships with family members, siblings, mentors, community members, and peers. Recognizing and honoring cultural diversity within relationships is also crucial for affirming children's identities and fostering a sense of pride in their identity, culture, and heritage.<sup>2</sup> Developing positive relationships supports the emotional, social, mental, and behavioral well-being of young adults. Experiencing

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<sup>1</sup> Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2022 data.

<sup>2</sup> Gonzalez, S., & Nguyen, L. (2024). Cultural Competence in Child Welfare: Building Stronger Relationships. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 28(1), 45-58.

meaningful relationships and connections to caring individuals can lead to higher self-esteem, an increased sense of belonging, stronger ties to community, and a general reduction in stress.

To ensure young people leave foster care with strengthened relationships and connections, child welfare agencies should:

- **Help young people develop multiple types of safe, nurturing relationships with caring adults.** Young people have repeatedly shared the need for safe connections to loving adults who can guide them into adulthood after foster care and beyond.
- **Support young people on their journey of learning about their family.** It is developmentally appropriate for young people to want to know about their family. Having the ability to learn about one's roots and important connections (e.g., family, kin, fictive kin, siblings, chosen family, etc.) is especially important for young people whose connections to family were disrupted by their placement in foster care.
- **Normalize conversations around identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, and gender) and help individuals to have those discussions.** This contributes to a strengthened sense of self during a time when young people are gaining a deeper understanding of their identities.

#### Underscore the Importance of Holistic Relationships

When working with young people to jointly plan for their transition to adulthood and life after foster care, it remains essential to ensure that young people have intentional connections and strengthened relationships to ensure their success. The role of these relationships becomes even more critical when faced with the kinds of challenges and hardships (e.g., financial, professional, personal, or familial) many people encounter in the course of their lives. Expanding the network of support that surrounds a young person can mitigate the impact of such challenges and promote the further resilience of each young person who has experienced child welfare.

Aspects of holistic connections and relationships that can be important to consider include:

- *Relationship with Oneself*, including knowing which relationships support individual well-being.
  - Some people find it difficult to engage in relationships for various reasons. Teaching young people how to connect with and understand themselves can be a good starting point.
  - Allow young people to explore activities and interests. As young people transition into adulthood, they will discover what promotes their well-being and can then develop strategies to increase, support, and maintain their well-being.
- *Whole Family Engagement*, with family defined by the young person.
  - This includes relationships with fathers and mothers, including those parents who have also been impacted by the child welfare system.
  - Sibling relationships and relationships with extended family members, as defined by young people, are some of the most significant familial relationships.

- *Peer-to-Peer Support.*
  - Peer support is based on the idea that individuals who have experienced and overcome adversity can serve as a source of support, encouragement, and hope to others experiencing similar situations. Peer supporters are also in a unique position to share knowledge about supportive resources or encourage engagement in services. Peer support can be particularly important for youth who are part of communities that are marginalized and face systematic barriers to program participation, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) youth, Tribal youth, and/or young people of color. Young people may find information or advice on services and supports more credible when it comes from someone who has had similar lived experiences.
  - While peer support activities can vary, a critical component involves helping adolescents and young adults seek out developmentally and culturally appropriate information. Peer relationships let other young people know they are not alone in the foster care experience. It is also helpful when young people can share resources, information, and strategies from their perspective to help their peers advocate for what they need and to facilitate equity in service provision.
  
- *Community Relationships and Social Connections* (e.g., mentors, teachers, coaches, churches/spiritual connections, organizations that nurture identity (e.g., LGBTQIA2S+)).
  - When asked, most people can name individuals who were critical to their development. These key relationships may be either short- or long-term, but provide critical support at key moments in one's development.
  - Relationship with community includes being engaged with the neighborhood, city, town, or other place where young people live. Encouraging and allowing young people to explore where they want to live may be another important step in forming this kind of relationship. For instance, young people may identify having nearby access to the outdoors as important to their well-being.
  
- *Social Capital-Focused Relationships.*
  - Social capital is rooted in networks and relationships where advice and resources are available based on the people you know. Social capital-focused relationships are important across the lifespan. Therefore, it can be very helpful to talk to young people about creating and nurturing such relationships.
  - While the development of social capital networks is important across all domains, those related to employment can be particularly important for young people transitioning from foster care. A major marker of the transition to young adulthood is beginning paid employment and assuming responsibilities for matters such as obtaining insurance, paying taxes, securing housing, and saving funds to prepare for other life goals. Historically, child welfare has focused on helping young people achieve educational outcomes, but less support has been provided to help young people enter the job market and develop their careers.

Child welfare agencies and partnering organizations should consider ways to support young people in developing relationships and networks to support their career development.

- *Relationships Between Young People and Professionals working within the Child Welfare Agency.*
  - As part of the work to improve the relationships and networks of young people who have experienced foster care, child welfare must acknowledge the power and importance of the relationships formed between young people and the child welfare agency. When young people are placed into foster care, a number of relationships are created, including those with foster parents, placement providers, guardians ad litem or court-appointed special advocates (CASAs), and other service providers. These relationships are created because a young person enters foster care and should be seen and treated as a critical resource for a young person.
  - Young people often indicate how important their caseworker or other professional was in their case and how detrimental changes in those relationships are. While caseworkers and social workers may see their jobs in terms of immediate case management and/or referral to services, young people see and understand their roles differently. Young people see their caseworker or social worker as someone who plays a critical role in determining the outcomes they and their families experience. Shifting the understanding of this role to one that recognizes the importance of it within the context of a *meaningful relationship* is critical to making the child welfare system more responsive to the individualized needs of young people.

### *Part 2: Ways to Support the Building and Nurturing of Positive, Culturally Relevant Relationships*

While creating relationships between individuals – particularly meaningful ones – is highly complex, embedding the following seven concepts into all child welfare programs will create the necessary conditions for individuals to serve as the supportive adults that young people need as they transition to adulthood.

**Positive Youth Development:** [Positive Youth Development](#), or PYD, is an approach that focuses on nurturing the strengths and abilities of young people and providing them with relationships, opportunities, and support in their communities so they can reach their full potential. Traditional approaches to working with youth in foster care often focus on deficits or problems. PYD, in contrast, recognizes, emphasizes, and builds upon strengths and abilities. PYD requires involving young people in decision-making and trusting and supporting their decisions.

**Trauma-Informed, Healing-Centered Practices, Approaches, and Engagement:**<sup>3</sup> Over the last 15 years, a greater emphasis has been made on the implementation of trauma-informed care and more recent discussions around healing-centered practices. Healing-centered approaches and engagement recognizes that past trauma (harm, loss, and grief) may have occurred but moves the conversation forward. Young people are more than the trauma they have experienced. To move past the trauma, it is important to focus on what is needed to support healing and well-being.

**Human/Participant Centered Design:** Human Centered Design is defined as “a design process and mindset that centers the end user to address complex problems in an innovative way.”<sup>4</sup> When looking at problems, the solution is focused on explicitly understanding the needs, tasks, and environments of those who will be utilizing the solution and other community partners. Another key component of human-centered design is that end users, such as program participants or young people experiencing foster care services, and community partners are involved throughout the design process, from problem identification to testing and evaluation solutions.

**Reflective Practice:** Reflective practice asks each individual working within the child welfare system to reflect on their work with children, families, and the young people they are supporting. Reflective practice asks us to think about how we can continue to improve practice by looking at our engagement, connections, active listening, and thoughtful questioning. Reflective practice is not just about our actions but also looks at relational aspects of those actions. The key is to seek and utilize feedback.

**Authentic Engagement:** As mentioned in the section, “*Relationships Between Young People and Professionals working within the Child Welfare Agency*” above, one of the critical relationships is between the youth/young adult and the child welfare agency. As currently structured, this typically involves the use of a caseworker, case manager, and often other individuals. Authentic engagement can be defined differently but essentially involves being actively in a relationship with a person. Critical to the idea of authentic engagement is taking time to get to know the other person, creating a safe and welcoming space, being authentic, and sharing power. Young people respond when individuals and agents of that organization act with integrity and are genuine in their efforts to assist young people and their families thrive. Authentic engagement requires honesty, awareness, and transparency and lends itself to the reflective practice outlined above.

**Adolescent Brain Science:** In the last 15 years, an incredible amount of information has been learned about the development of the brain in adolescence and young adulthood. This information requires child welfare agencies to rethink how we help and support young people

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed explanation, please see “The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement” by Shawn Ginwright at <https://ginwright.medium.com/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>. Please also see the additional recommendations for practice and policy named in the article.

<sup>4</sup> Rosinsky, K., Murray, D.W., Nagle, K., Boyd, S., Shaw, S., Supplee, L., & Putnam, M. (2022). *A Review of Human-Centered Design in Human Services*, OPRE Report 2022-78, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, page 2.

learn, grow, and achieve their goals. As outlined in ACF’s [Dear Colleague Letter](#) entitled, “Strengthening Support for Adolescents and Young Adults in ACF Programs,” we know that this important life stage requires young people to have scaffolding, support, and environments that help them to achieve their goals. For young people in transition from foster care, the child welfare agency is or has been operating in a role as a parent. Therefore, child welfare services and provider networks must be able to address their needs through policy and practice to help provide connections to supportive adults who are respectful and give them control over their decisions. Child welfare agency leaders should explore strategies to inform young people about brain science and the impacts of their developing brains, particularly the scientific need for independence at such a critical time for interdependence that adulthood requires. Learning about brain science can empower young people to understand more deeply the feelings and actions they are experiencing during this critical time of development. (Please see Recommendations for Strengthening Support for Adolescents and Young Adults in the Dear Colleague Letter for concrete recommendations.)

**Equity:** On January 20, 2021, President Biden signed [Executive Order 13985](#), “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.” The Executive Order defined the term “equity” as the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including those who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, Indigenous and Native American, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

For young people who have been impacted by the foster care system, ensuring equity is critical to improving the foster care system. In fact, agencies operating the Chafee program are responsible “for ensuring fair and equitable treatment of benefit recipients” (section 477(b)(2)(E) of the Act).

But far too often, young people report not being treated equitably – i.e., they do not receive the supports they need to be successful. While trying to be helpful, individuals in the child welfare system may treat all young people equally, but fall short of ensuring equitable outcomes. When considering the services and supports that young people need, an equity lens would look at it with the understanding that some individuals may need additional support to achieve the same goal.

Supporting young people through an equity lens means we also challenge the biases and the beliefs that certain services, programs, and/or resources should be “earned” by young people. Instead, all young people deserve opportunities and to be empowered to make the best decisions knowing there are the appropriate resources to support them.

### *Part 3: Normalize Access to Concrete Resources and Supports*

As with many organizations, CB continues to recognize the importance of providing young people with access to concrete resources, both in times of crisis and on an ongoing basis. Few individuals are able to focus on their well-being and the future when their immediate needs are not being met, such as when they risk losing housing and becoming homeless. While resources and supports have expanded over the years, the number of young people experiencing homelessness after the transition from foster care remains unacceptably high. No young person should be transitioned from foster care to homelessness.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social services agencies and other community organizations made progress in providing direct cash assistance to young people. These payments helped stabilize young people in crisis and/or prevented negative outcomes. Such payments also support transition-age young people by helping them develop skills around money management, decision-making, and budgeting.

As part of the implementation of best practices to support young people, we urge child welfare agencies to develop mechanisms to support the concrete needs of young people without barriers when assistance is needed. Looking at providing direct financial and/or cash assistance within the context of seven concepts outlined above in Part 2 will allow child welfare agencies to look at this assistance in a way that is focused on centering the dignity and well-being of young people.

Finally, when a title IV-E agency serves as representative payee for young people in foster care who receive Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, it is very important for the agency to use ongoing case planning and transition planning processes to ensure young people understand their benefits. Title IV-E agencies are encouraged to work with the Social Security Administration to explore opportunities for conserving benefits to promote the best interests of the young people, and to provide resources as they transition from foster care. For additional information, please see: [Letter Regarding Reminders to State and Tribal Title IV-E agencies about the Social Security Representative Payee Program and the Title IVE Federal Foster Care Program](#).

### **CONCLUSION:**

Young people who have experienced foster care need child welfare agency leaders and staff to support their hopes, dreams, and aspirations by helping them to establish healthy, meaningful relationships and community connections, including with the individuals who work on behalf of child welfare. To accomplish that, young people transitioning out of foster care need concrete and personalized services, supports, and a system that is better designed with intentional focus on their social connections and healing for successful transitioning.

We encourage all child welfare agencies to partner with young people to assess how their programs align with the concepts outlined in this IM and to commit to changing systems so that



they work better for the young people they are intended to support. Many in the foster care alumni community are also ready to partner with agencies and youth currently in foster care to improve child welfare programs and services.

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**INQUIRIES TO:** [CB Regional Program Managers](#)

/s/  
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**Additional Resources:**

[National Foster Care Month 2023 and 2024](#)

[Strengthening Support for Adolescents and Young Adults in ACF Programs](#)

[Extension of Foster Care Beyond Age 18](#)

[Permanency](#)