



# The Parameters of Youth Welfare

Statewide coordinators for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (formerly the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program [CFCIP]) and Education and Training Vouchers met in Washington, DC, in June 2017. During that meeting, participants discussed an important shift in child welfare culture, one that identified a new paradigm for “youth welfare.”

This new Youth Welfare approach can be viewed as a logical extension of the shift from child welfare to youth welfare. It presents the four transformations that need to occur at the organizational and practice levels to meet the needs of young people in foster care.



## Shift From Being Reactive to Being Proactive

Under a Youth Welfare approach, being proactive rather than reactive means working with young people in foster care on an ongoing basis to plan for the future, identify what they need and want, and create a realistic plan for moving forward. Rather than simply responding to crises as they occur, child welfare staff and young people work together to shape the future.

- ▶ **Dialogue and shared decision-making power:** Youth in foster care should be engaged in dialogue and share in decision-making about the best ways to meet their developmental needs, as well as regarding their goals, aspirations, and identity exploration. Throughout their time in care, young people should receive developmentally appropriate information about the policies and procedures related to the services they receive and the expectations for their role in their own care. For their part, caseworkers should respond to young people’s requests for assistance in their own care in a timely manner, for example, by proactively assisting them in getting access to documents they need.
- ▶ **Self-sufficiency:** Organizations should encourage young people’s present independence and future self-sufficiency by helping them explore meaningful career pathways and find work, internships, and volunteering and leadership opportunities based on their interests and skills. Young people in foster care should be encouraged to explore and make connections to resources in the community.
- ▶ **Assessments based on relationships and trust:** Life skills/Independent Living assessments for young people need to occur in a context of trust and relationship building to elicit the best possible information necessary to plan for a young person’s future. Assessments and interventions should be initiated at the outset of engagement only if they are mandated or otherwise necessary in a particular circumstance for a particular youth. Otherwise, they should occur as appropriate, after a relationship is built, and be adapted as needs change on an ongoing basis to move the young person’s development process forward. Young

people in foster care should work on assessments together with staff to provide additional input outside of the assessment to give a clearer picture of themselves as individuals. Assessments should be positive, strengths based, conducted largely for the benefit of the young people themselves, and focused on their needs, aspirations, goals, identity explorations, and vision of the future. Assessment regarding developmental readiness and benchmarks should be understood in the context of research on adolescent development and developmental capacity and the youth's level of social capital.

- ▶ **Permanency and connections:** Organizations should help young people achieve legal, emotional, and physical permanency by facilitating their ability to build varied familial, social, and peer connections in a developmentally appropriate manner. Each organization should work to create a guiding document to assist young people and child welfare staff in working toward permanency according to the youth's developmental stage. Organizations must remember to implement an opportunity-focused environment in a developmentally appropriate way when exploring possible connections.
- ▶ **Well-being:** Interventions should promote well-being through the lens of normalcy. It is critical that young people get the medical, dental, and mental/behavioral health care they need, including interventions for concerns like trauma, coping, and emotion regulation if warranted. Mental health services should focus on trauma-informed and trauma-responsive care and promote resiliency. However, a more holistic definition of well-being for young people should be built around a broad understanding of physical, social, and emotional development, as well as psychosocial and trauma-focused needs, rather than just focusing on narrow categories of medical health and education. In building and accessing this definition, listening to young people themselves is crucial.
- ▶ **Collaborative practice:** When working with young people, it is important that child welfare organizations should work together with other public agencies and private organizations that shape the lives and futures of young people in foster care, potentially including education, employment, housing, health-care, social service, and other organizations. By working creatively with the youth and other organizations and looking outward to communities and other supports, child welfare agencies can help young people comprehensively plan for their future.

## Shift From Being Case-Driven to Being Individualized and Youth-Driven

Shifting from a case-driven to a youth-driven framework for care means giving young people in foster care more autonomy and control over decisions that affect their lives. Rather than focusing only on adhering to a general case plan for the family, staff should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage with youth to collaboratively develop a holistic, individualized plan that incorporates their voice and is grounded in their strengths, interests, and needs.

- ▶ **Biological family:** Young people in foster care should be able to decide what their connections with biological family should be. Organizations can help youth make safe connections and learn skills to interact with their biological families. They can also help young people maintain connections, use natural supports, and create space for more caregiver flexibility and development if they are removed. The decision to remove a young person from biological family should be made holistically, and significant weight should be given to the wishes of the young person involved, in addition to the protective factors that exist in the youth's life that can mitigate risk.
- ▶ **Youth voice:** Organizations should emphasize youth voice in decision-making and youth-driven case planning. In their relationships with young people, organizations should consider how to create a better balance of power between young people and child welfare staff. The ideal relationship is a collaborative partnership or mentorship between young people and adults. Young people should be viewed as individuals, not members of a care system, and should be engaged in legislation and policy conversations about normalcy and foster care, as well as in conversations about their own cases.

- ▶ **Choice:** Organizations should make sure that young people have safe spaces to be themselves and access to an array of program and service options. Organizations should also allow and assist young people to explore and develop other supportive relationships in their lives, including those with family members, mentors, friends, and community members. Youth should be taught and expected to advocate for themselves with support from child welfare staff. The necessary support to develop self-advocacy skills is a process that occurs over time and requires coaching.

## Shift From Being Protection-Focused to Being Normalcy-Focused (Developmentally Framed)

Shifting from a focus on protection to a focus on normalcy means that young people in foster care will have the opportunity to experience their teenage years in a way similar to their peers not in foster care. Child welfare organizations should assess the way they think about risk factors and protective factors and adjust these views as needed based on what is now known about normal adolescent brain development and risk taking.

- ▶ **Protection focus:** While the safety of all children and youth in foster care is important, research suggests that the emphasis on protection that is the norm for younger children in foster care should be relaxed for youth in foster care. Like other adolescents, youth in foster care should be given some room to have experiences and take risks without negative judgment. When they face challenges, even those that result from their own decisions and behaviors, youth in care should be provided a safety net, as well as support and guidance, to learn from them.
- ▶ **Normalcy and risk taking:** Organizations should think about how they can keep young people safe while at the same time providing them maximum normalcy, allowing them to take appropriate risks, and encouraging them to engage in developmentally appropriate activities. This means creating space for healthy risk taking, increased independence, connections with peers and caring adults, access to enrichment activities, and access to the same experiences as their same-age peers to build resilience and learn by doing.
- ▶ **Individualized care:** Organizations should not assume the capabilities of youth but offer individualized care for all young people that corresponds with their developmental stage, needs, and preferences. Organizations should meet young people where they actually are and align services with their needs and risks in a developmentally appropriate manner.

## Shift From Being Focused on the Past or Present Situation of a Child to Being Focused on the Future of the Youth and Young People Being Served

A shift from past- or present-focused to future-focused care means that child welfare workers shift from concentrating on the child's present needs and past trauma to focusing on planning for the future as the young person transitions to adulthood. This doesn't mean that trauma-informed care is no longer relevant for the young person in foster care. Rather, there is a new orientation to helping the young person prepare for adult life.

- ▶ **Future-focused care:** In a future-focused model of care, youth needs, goals, and aspirations drive services in a present and future perspective. Young people need to be supported in the present in ways that will facilitate their access to services that will benefit them in the future. In the youth welfare model, young people are engaged in ongoing case planning and asked about what they need in the present and future, including the long-term future. Caseworkers and adult supporters can help youth think through the ways in which decisions and planning in the present can lead to a variety of outcomes.



- ▶ **Preparation for adulthood:** Organizations should aim to assist youth in preparation for adulthood with concrete skill-building and development opportunities. This preparation should start by asking young people where and how they see their future selves. Organizations should then focus on strengths-based assessment to empower youth to take positive action in their lives and work with mentors to develop a plan that builds skills needed for the future. Staff should also help young people build communities of support to assist them in their adult lives and work with them on skills build their social capital. At this stage in a youth's development, it is critical that child welfare organizations, together with the young people they serve, be able to anticipate the supports young people in foster care might need as they move forward into adulthood.

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