



BRIEF

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Suzanne Korff, MSW
Amanda Miller, MSW
Jay Unick, PhD, MSW

The Institute for Innovation
& Implementation
School of Social Work
University of Maryland,
Baltimore

*Youth REACH MD:
Reach out, Engage, Assist, &
Count to end Homelessness*
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Youth Homelessness Among Foster Care Alumni

*An analysis of the needs of Maryland's former foster youth experiencing homelessness from
the 2018 Youth REACH MD data*

Introduction

Across the U.S., there were 442,995 children in foster care and 3,923 children in foster care in Maryland in 2017 (Children's Bureau, 2018a). Although foster care is intended as a temporary service to provide short-term care and support services to children who are unable to live at home because of child abuse and neglect (Department of Human Services, 2018), youth often remain in the system for years, shifting between foster care homes, friend's homes, childhood home(s), and various other locations (Williams-Mbengue, 2008). Prolonged out-of-home care in foster care placements or group homes increases the likelihood that youth will exit the foster care system without the natural support system¹ of social, emotional and material support typically provided by family and friends (Jones, 2014), and previous research has established linkages between foster care involvement and educational disengagement, juvenile justice system involvement, and future homelessness and housing instability (Hirsh, et. al., 2017; Cutuli, et al., 2015; Britton & Pilnik, 2018).

Each year approximately 25,000 youth 'age out' of the foster care system at either age 18 or 21, depending on the state, and must find and secure stable housing, often with little or no support from their family or the state (Dion, Dworsky, Kauff & Kleinman, 2014). In Maryland, 18% of foster youth age out of care, compared to 10% nationally (Harburger and Greeno, 2016). Older youth in foster care are less likely to achieve permanency through reunification with family or through adoption (Salazar, et. al., 2018), and in Maryland, the majority of youth over the age of 14 are likely to remain in care until they age out when they turn 21 (Harburger and Greeno, 2016). With a weakened natural support network, youth struggle to make the transition from foster care to adulthood and self-sufficiency (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Rapp, 2010). As a result, transition age youth face a disproportionate risk of drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, economic instability, criminal justice involvement, becoming young parents, and future homelessness (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Rapp, 2010).

While parental poverty and housing instability cannot be a reason that a child enters foster care, they are highly correlated with children's entry into the foster care system (National Center for Housing and Child Welfare, 2015). In Maryland, 5% of youth entering foster care between 14-17 and 6% of youth, ages 18-21, had a housing issue at the time they entered care (Greeno, Harburger, Shannahan & Soulé, 2015), and 10% of reports referenced inadequate or unstable housing in the circumstances associated with the decision to remove a child from their care (Children's Bureau, 2018c). Because housing instability is not a cause for removal, and so not fully tracked, these numbers are likely a substantial undercount of the true prevalence of housing instability in the child welfare system, and there is evidence that housing instability is both a risk factor for entry into the foster care system, and an unintended consequence of long-term foster care involvement.

¹ Natural support system refers to the emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental, and material assistance provided by family and friends in a person's network (Dunst & Trivette, 1988).

Children and youth with a history of foster care involvement have a disproportionate risk of mental health and behavioral health disorders compared to their peers, further impacting their ability to obtain and maintain housing (Simms, Dubowitz & Szilagyi, 2000). Trauma from early experiences of abuse and neglect is compounded when children are removed from their homes and placed with strangers (Pecora, 2010). As a result of these early experiences, nearly 25% of adolescents in foster care are diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder, more than six times the rate in the general public (Forkey & Szilagyi, 2014). These experiences impact their ability to form secure attachments with caregivers (Taussig, 2002), and increase the rate of diagnosed mental health problems (Connell, et. al., 2006).

Another risk factor for future homelessness is dual involvement with the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Upwards of 50% of youth involved in juvenile justice are also involved with foster care, and youth who become involved in both systems are likely to have needs that are more numerous and complex than youth in either system alone (Thomas, 2015). Yet, foster youth involved in the juvenile or criminal justice system are at risk of losing access to independent living planning opportunities and other supportive services available to transition-age youth in foster care due to a lack of information sharing between the two systems and strict eligibility requirements for independent living programs (Herz, Ryan & Bilchik, 2010).

Running away from home is also a predictor of homelessness in adulthood (Dworsky, et al., 2012). Youth who have been in foster care were over three times more likely to run away from home than youth who had never lived in a foster home (Benoit-Bryan, 2011). Running away negatively impacts the stability of foster care placements, lowering the odds that the placement will end in a permanent home (Benoit-Bryan, 2011), and exposes unsheltered youth to risks of sexual exploitation, health issues, substance abuse, and delinquent behavior (Crosland & Dunlap, 2014). This increases their risk of immediate and future homelessness (Ibid). Like dually-involved youth, youth who age out of the foster care system while they are on runaway status may face difficulties accessing benefits intended to support their transition out of foster care into adulthood (Benoit-Bryan, 2011).

Nationally, an estimated 65% of youth leaving foster care need immediate housing upon discharge (O’Neale, 2015), and an estimated “50% of adolescents aging out of foster care and juvenile justice systems will become homeless within six months” (Britton & Pilnik, 2018). Maryland surveys of foster care alumni revealed that youth exiting foster care often had secure housing for the first three months after exiting foster care, but the majority soon became unable to manage rent, resulting in 100% who had experienced or were currently experiencing housing instability, and 99% who had stayed in emergency shelters since exiting foster care within 6 months of leaving care (Harburger & Greeno, 2016). These findings reflect previous research, which has shown that youth with a history of foster care are more likely to experience homelessness at an early age, and to remain homeless for a longer period of time (O’Neale, 2015).

Characteristics of former foster youth experiencing homelessness

Despite substantial evidence that youth aging out of foster care are at high risk of becoming homeless, relatively little is known about the unique challenges that this population faces when compared to other unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. This paper draws on data from the 2018 Youth REACH MD Youth Count, an initiative launched in 2015 “to document and better understand the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, with a goal of improving policies, services and interventions” (Miller, Unick & Harburger, 2017). To survey unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, Youth REACH MD partners with local Continuums of Care (CoCs), who are “encouraged to develop creative strategies for connecting with and engaging youth in their area, in conjunction with community partners and local youth” (Miller, Unick & Harburger, 2017). Surveys are distributed to community partners known to serve or accommodate homeless youth, at schools, and to

Youth REACH MD defines *unaccompanied homeless youth* as those individuals who are:

- Under the age of 25;
- Not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian; and,
- Lacking a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence.

youth experiencing homelessness on the street. Of the 816 unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness between the ages of 11-24 who were surveyed during the 2018 Youth Count, 785 responded to the question “have you ever been in foster care”. As shown in Table 1, below, 160 youth (20%) reported foster care histories.²

After comparing youth with foster care histories to those without, three statistically significant differences were identified: lower rates of school enrollment after age 18, higher rates of juvenile justice or criminal justice involvement, and extreme housing instability among older youth. Together, these findings indicate that foster youth are at greater risk of experiencing more severe and prolonged housing instability than their unstably housed or homeless peers.

Table 1: Foster care status of youth experiencing homelessness

Foster Care History (n=785)	Count	Percent
UHY with Foster Care	160	20%
UHY no Foster Care	625	80%

To explore the differences in school enrollment among youth experiencing homelessness with foster care histories and without, youth were divided into three age categories: under 18, 18-21 and 22-24. The rates of school enrollment were relatively similar among youth under the age of 18, when youth are legally required to be enrolled in school in Maryland. However, the rate of school enrollment dropped off among youth between 18 and 21, when school attendance is no longer mandatory and transition-age youth’s support network begins to diminish as they age out of care. **Unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness with foster care histories are significantly³ more likely to not be in school after age 18 compared to their unstably housed or homeless peers**, with just 36% of youth over 18 with foster care histories reporting current school enrollment compared to nearly half (49%) of youth with no foster care history (see Table 2). Moreover, unaccompanied youth with foster care histories are more likely to drop out of school without receiving a high school diploma or GED than youth without foster care histories (25% versus 20%), and both groups exceed the U.S. average of 12.5% for youth between the ages of 18-24 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Table 2: 18-21 year old youth school enrollment status

	Count	Percent Enrolled in School
Youth with Foster Care Histories (n=75)	27	36%
Youth with no Foster Care History (n=272)	133	49%
All Youth (n=347)	160	46%

To understand differences in rates of criminal justice involvement, all youth who reported ever spending time in either juvenile detention or jail were considered to have involvement with the justice system. This group was divided into those who did and those who did not also report any foster care history. **Unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness with foster care histories were significantly⁴ more likely to have spent time in jail or juvenile detention compared to youth experiencing homelessness without foster care history** (see Table 3). This finding builds on the existing evidence that youth with foster care history are at greater risk for future justice system involvement, as well as findings that both juvenile justice and foster care involvement are associated with a higher risk of experiencing homelessness.

² These numbers include all youth who responded yes to the question ‘Have you ever been in foster care’, and includes youth who reported the age they left foster care, even if they answered no to the former question.

³ Statistically significant difference from youth without foster care histories at $p < .05$.

⁴ Statistically significant difference from youth without foster care histories at $p < .001$.

Table 3: Youth reporting juvenile justice involvement or time spent in jail

	Count	Percent
Youth with Foster Care History (n=160)	90	56%
Youth with no Foster Care History (n=625)	263	42%
All Youth (n=785)	353	45%

To understand how foster care history impacts housing stability in the long term, unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness reporting four or more moves in the last two months were compared to those reporting zero to three moves within the last two months. These numbers were compared for youth with and without foster care histories. **Thirty-one percent of surveyed youth with foster care histories reported moving over four times in the last two months, an average of every 2-3 weeks, significantly more than youth experiencing homelessness with no foster care history (19%)** (see Table 4). The high rate of housing instability among former foster youth is a potential indicator of a weakened natural support system, and may put unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness with foster care histories at greater risk of chronic homelessness in the future, also impacting their ability to achieve education and career goals and maintain good physical and mental health.

Table 4: Youth reported number of moves in the last two months

	Count	Percent
Youth with Foster Care History (n=160)		
Reporting 4+ moves	50	31%*
Reporting 0-3 moves	110	68%
Youth with no Foster Care History (n=642)		
Reporting 4+ moves	117	19%
Reporting 0-3 moves	508	81%
All Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (n=785)		
Reporting 4+ moves	167	21%
Reporting 0-3 moves	618	79%

*Statistically significant difference from youth without foster care histories at $p < .001$.

These findings highlight the ways in which youth experiencing homelessness who have been in foster care are more likely to be isolated from both formal and natural support networks. Furthermore, the high rates of dual involvement further undermines their ability to access transition services or formal support within the foster care system.

The lower rate of school enrollment among older youth is indicative of further disconnection from systems of support, and studies have shown that leaving school is often a turning point in the lives of unaccompanied homeless youth, as it results in both lost earning potential and further isolates youth from potential positive support networks (Julienelle, 2008). These factors, combined with the trauma of neglect, abuse and foster care placement (Pecora, 2010), undermine youth's ability to achieve housing stability, education and employment, permanent connections to natural supports, and social and emotional well-being, the key outcome indicators identified in the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Opening Doors Federal Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness (USICH, 2015). While unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness are a population already at greater risk of poor outcomes, the higher frequency of moves among older unaccompanied homeless youth with foster care histories is indicative of more severe housing instability and potentially higher risk of chronic homelessness in the future.

Because of the high risk of becoming isolated from both formal and natural support systems, programs targeting youth with foster care histories should focus on strengthening relationships with natural supports. Likewise, policy

interventions should identify strategies to improve coordination between education, foster care and youth-serving systems including juvenile justice. Approaches to improving coordination should include, but are not limited to, data sharing, maintaining foster care case management and benefits for youth involved in the juvenile justice system, ensuring that youth receive adequate transition planning before exiting care, and allowing youth to maintain access to independent living services, continuation of foster care, and after care services (Thomas, 2014).

Policy Efforts to Support Youth with Foster Care Histories: Federal legislation, state initiatives and local programs

Over the last twenty years, both the Federal and Maryland State Government have taken steps to improve outcomes for transition-age youth exiting the foster care system. Federal legislation has incrementally increased the age at which youth are no longer eligible for support through the foster care system, and increased funding and expanded the types of services foster care systems are able to provide. The following key pieces of legislation support transition-age foster youth and youth at risk of homelessness and provide a framework, standards of care, and key funding sources for state foster care systems. At the state level, Maryland Department of Human Services has been diligent in aligning with these federal policies and changes, and the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development has expanded programs and funding targeted to meeting the needs of youth experiencing homelessness.

The primary legislation supporting shelter and services for youth experiencing homelessness is the **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act**, first passed in 1974 (Bradley, 1997). The RHYA supports the Basic Shelter program, a federal program authorizing short-term emergency shelter for youth under the age of 18, the Transitional Living Program providing extended residential shelter and access to supportive services to homeless youth ages 16-22, and the Street Outreach Program (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014).

The U.S. foster care system has recognized the need to improve support to transition-age youth since 1986, when Title IV-E of the Social Security Act was amended to create an Independent Living Program, making funding available for states to provide foster youth with independent living services (Courtney, Lee, and Perez, 2011). This legislation was expanded in 1999 under the **John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act**, which increased funding for independent services from \$70 million to \$140 million, expanded eligibility, increased the number of eligible activities including housing, at a rate of up to 30% of funds, and granted states the option of extending Medicaid coverage for former foster youth to 21 (Permaget, McDaniel & Hawkins, 2012). In 2002, a voucher program was added to the act meet the education and training needs of youth aging out of care, making available vouchers of up to \$5,000 per year for post-secondary education and training for eligible youth (Children's Bureau, 2012). The Maryland Independent Living Program currently provides the following services: financial support and placement for semi-independent living arrangements with the support of an Independent Living Coordinator, financial assistance to purchase goods and services, referrals for counseling, employment, education and medical assistance, the option to re-enter foster care before their 21st birthday, and a tuition waiver for post-secondary education (Maryland DHS, n.d.).

In 2008, congress passed the **Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act**, further amending Title IV to extend the age of eligibility from 18 to 21 (Courtney, Lee and Perez, 2011), and to provide provisions prior to emancipation for all youth expected to age out of the foster care system (Children's Bureau, 2013). The Act defines a transition plan as "a personalized plan developed by the foster care agency to assist the youth to transit out of foster care during the 90-day period before a youth turns 18 or is scheduled to leave foster care" (Ibid). The Act also increases federal responsibility for transition-age youth, allowing states to claim federal reimbursement for the cost of foster care payments made on behalf of eligible foster youth up to the age of 21 (Courtney, Lee and Perez, 2011). However, to qualify for continued benefits, foster youth 18 and older are required to be enrolled in school; participating in an employment or training program, employed at least 80 hours per month or more, or deemed incapable of meeting these requirements for medical reasons (Ibid).

Passed in February 2018 and still in the early stages of implementation, the **Family First Prevention Services Act** further expands support to transition age youth, increasing eligibility for independent living services from 21 to 23, and the use of education and training vouchers for foster youth until 26 (First Focus, 2018). The new law also reforms federal foster care financing streams to increase funding and services to families at risk of separation, and to de-incentivize group home placements (First Focus, 2018). Specifically, the law allows state agencies to claim federal reimbursement for mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and in-home parenting training for birth families, and encourages continued connection to birth families by eliminating the time limit for family reunification (Children’s Defense, 2018). While there is flexibility for states to delay implementation, the Maryland Department of Human Services Social Service Administration has declared its intention to implement the Family First Prevention Services Act provisions by October 2019. The new law not only further expands access to critical services for transition age youth, but also seeks to strengthen the foster care system’s support to birth families, potentially helping youth in the system to avoid out-of-home placements, maintain connections to their birth families and thereby strengthen their natural support networks when they exit care.

Maryland state legislation and foster care policy mirrors these trends, sometimes leading and sometimes following federal policy. In 2007, the state launched the **Place Matters** initiative, which promotes safety, family strengthening, permanency and community-based services for children and families in the foster care system. As a result of these efforts, there has been more than a 50% decrease in the number of children in out-of-home placements across Maryland since January 2010 (Harburger & Greeno, 2016). The Families Blossom, Title IV-E Waiver Program continues and expands on the work done through the Place Matters Initiative, supporting demonstration projects and allowing greater flexibility in child welfare spending and the availability of resources targeted to supporting birth families.

In order to improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care, Maryland Department of Human Services launched the **Ready by 21** initiative in 2010. Ready by 21 focuses on five key domains that are necessary to help youth be on target to become self-sufficient when they exit care, including: Education, Employment, Health, Housing, Financial Literacy, and Family and Friends Support (Maryland Department of Human Services, n.d.) Each domain has associated benchmarks that guide the work between foster care workers and youth. In partnership with the Institute for Innovation and Implementation, The Department of Human Services Emerging Adults Workgroup is in the process of revising the Ready by 21 benchmarks and the Youth Transition Plan with the latest research and best practices identified to support youth transitioning from foster care (C. Gould-Kabler, personal communication, January 30, 2019).

Gaps in Federal and State Programs

While Federal and State programs have significantly expanded the services and funding available to transition age youth, the high rate of homelessness among former foster youth is indicative that gaps remain. Studies of current and former foster youth reveal that youth report receiving few of the services that Chafee dollars are intended to fund (Courtney, Lee, and Perez, 2011). Moreover, the high rate of disengagement from school and formal systems of support, as well as the increased rate of juvenile justice involvement, indicate that the most vulnerable transition-age youth may be ineligible for independent living services altogether and are less likely to access transition planning services (Wylie, 2014). While the eligibility requirements vary by state and by service area within the Independent Living Program, applicants for semi-independent living services and after-care in Maryland are required to be between the ages of 18-21, have been in care at the age of 18, and many services require that the youth either work or continue their education, or commit to continuing their education within 30 days of enrolling in the program (Maryland DHS, n.d.).

In addition to eligibility barriers, transition-age youth are also often fatigued by system involvement and perceive the Independent Living Program as “seriously inadequate” and “yet another provider” with whom they are required to interact (Geenan & Powers, 2007). Federal requirements for transition plans focus almost exclusively on the logistics of exiting care, e.g., housing, health care, employment, etc., while ignoring the emotional, psychological and social aspects of the transition. As a result, youth often exit care without identifying or establishing a natural support network to help them to achieve their goals when they leave the system (Children’s Bureau, 2018).

Moreover, housing is generally not perceived as one of the foster care system's primary responsibilities (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden & Rosenau, 2012). Foster care workers are often not aware of housing programs or resources available to emancipating foster youth (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden & Rosenau, 2012). Similarly, housing providers don't often assess for or consider the child welfare system as a possible resource for youth and young adults (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden & Rosenau, 2012), in spite of programs allowing youth with foster care histories to access housing, education and other supportive services (Maryland DHS, n.d.). While the Maryland foster care system provides transition planning, independent living classes, and aftercare independent living support up to age 21, these services alone are not sufficient or widely accessed and the transition process remains abrupt and inadequate (Dion, Dworsky, Kauff & Kleinman, 2014). These gaps help to explain the heightened risk of homelessness for youth exiting care, and the higher rates of school disengagement, juvenile justice involvement and extreme housing instability among former foster youth experiencing homelessness.

Promising Practice: Youth at Risk of Homelessness Grantee – THRIVE@25 Maryland

Recognizing the persistent risk factors for youth exiting care in spite of increased funding and expanded eligibility requirements, the Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services) funded a multi-phase grant program referred to as the Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) Grant to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults who have been involved in the foster care system (Kans, Stagner & Bradley, 2018). YARH grantees will be evaluated using USICH framework for ending and preventing youth homelessness, which requires demonstrating positive outcomes across four domains: a) stable housing, b) permanent connections, c) education & employment, and d) social emotional well-being (USICH, n.d.).

The Maryland YARH program, THRIVE@25, is targeted to transition-age foster youth in Maryland's rural Mid-Shore (Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, and Talbot counties). In order to more effectively include youth input in the planning process and increase the focus on youth's natural support networks, the program uses an **Enhanced Youth Transitional Planning process** that utilizes the Achieve My Plan model, an evidence-informed approach to engage and support youth and their support teams. The program strengthens Family Involvement Meetings, an existing team planning approach used across Maryland's foster care system, to plan for a youth's transition from out-of-home care with the youth, caseworker and foster and/or birth family members, as appropriate, engaged in the process. The goal of the enhanced transition planning process is to create an individualized, strengths-based, youth-driven transition plan for each youth that is the result of a transition planning process that supports youth development of self-determination and life skills, and fosters positive connections to form a support network for youth to call upon both during and after their time in out-of-home care. To more effectively address issues of housing, the THRIVE@25 program also includes a housing coordinator and the opportunity for youth to secure housing in shared-living accommodations at the THRIVE House (Miller, 2018).

Recommendations to improve outcomes for transition-age foster youth

Based on these findings and the current policies, the following actions would help to further prevent experiences of homelessness for youth with foster care histories by supporting improved transition planning, strengthening of natural support networks, improved coordination between child and youth-serving systems, and increasing access to the resources available to former foster youth through both the foster care system's independent living programs and HUD-funded programs such as Basic Centers and FUP vouchers. These are intended as a starting point for youth-serving organizations to respond to the needs of transition-age foster youth and youth who have exited the system.

Foster Care System:

1. **Establish a robust transition-planning process that is youth-driven, strengths-based, and comprehensive.** Programs should work with youth to develop a regularly updated, individualized transition plan reflective of the youth's personal goals and objectives, recognizing the role of their natural support network and mentors in supporting them to achieve these goals. The transition plan should include concrete details on the youth's plans for education, employment/financial stability, housing and health care after exiting the system.
2. **Support youth in identifying and strengthening their natural support system.** Transition-age youth rely on their natural support network to navigate early adulthood, a network that might include their birth families or extended family network, caring adults, romantic partners or others. Programs should find ways to engage the youth's network of supportive adults (foster parents, birth parents, other family members and case workers) in transition planning and preparation, helping the youth to strengthen these relationships before exiting care.
3. **Prepare caseworkers to identify housing options for youth exiting care.** Programs serving transition age youth should have staff responsible for identifying safe and decent housing options for youth exiting care, either directly, or in coordination with the local Continuum of Care (CoC). Foster care staff may not be informed of housing and homeless services targeting youth in their area and may require either additional training or partnership to support youth to identify housing options that meets their needs.
4. **Analyze data on the housing status of youth exiting care.** Child welfare foster care staff are required to collect basic demographic data and outcome data on youth in care at the age of 17 and then to survey youth at age 19 and 21 on the same six core outcomes: 1) financial self-sufficiency, 2) education attainment, 3) connection with adults, 4) homelessness, 5) high-risk behaviors, and 6) access to health insurance, with the data stored in the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). The survey should also include a question on whether youth are unaccompanied in the follow-up survey as this is currently only tracked for immigrant/refugee youth.

Continuum of Care and Homeless Service Providers:

1. **Educate providers on resources available to former foster youth.** Youth exiting the foster care system may be eligible for a range of independent living supports, education training vouchers, and housing vouchers. Providers should be familiar with the programs available to youth exiting care, including those available through the foster care system and other youth-serving systems, and know how to enroll or refer former foster youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness.
2. **Create a by-name list of youth experiencing homelessness & conduct regular case conferencing with Child Welfare staff.** Initially established to help CoCs and veteran-serving agencies coordinate services for veteran's experiencing homelessness, by-name lists enable systems of care to track the housing status of target populations within the homeless services system and to conduct regular case conferences with key stakeholders, such as foster care caseworkers, outside the continuum of care system. The youth by-name list should include a question on the foster care status of all youth under the age of 26 in order to identify youth eligible for housing and supportive services through child welfare. Foster care staff working with transition age youth should be invited to assist in management of the community's by-name list for youth in order to identify those youth who have foster care experience, assess the types of housing the youth was utilizing upon exiting care, and partner on strategies to improve the success of housing solutions for youth to prevent homelessness (Corporation for Supportive Housing, n.d.).
3. **Support youth voice and choice in housing placements.** Youth experiencing homelessness have unique needs and priorities that require a different approach to homeless services than adult clients, and they may require more intensive, individualized and long-term supports. Regardless of the type of housing and supportive services provided, CoCs and homeless service providers should prioritize youth voice and choice, and ensure that youth have a say in the type of housing and supports they receive (Gaetz, 2017).
4. **Develop or enhance family reunification practices at youth-targeted shelters, Basic Centers and drop-in centers.** Families remain an important potential source of support for former foster youth experiencing homelessness, and with appropriate training and an intensive family case management approach, service providers have successfully supported the reunification of homeless and runaway youth with their families

(Vandivere & Malm, 2015). Family Finding is a promising practice used largely in child welfare, but increasingly by youth housing service providers to locate and engage relatives and other natural supports for youth experiencing homelessness (Greeno, et. al., 2019).

Cross-System Policies:

- 1. Provide support to families to reduce foster care involvement, and whenever feasible divert children's entry into the foster care system.** Foster care involvement disrupts children's natural support networks and relationships with their birth families, removing a critical support network that youth need during the transition to adulthood, a time when the foster care system involvement will inevitably come to end. Whenever possible programs should provide families the support they need to keep children in their families, and strive to maintain connections to families and support networks for children in care. The Family First Prevention Services Act provides additional support to birth families and focuses on furthering efforts to prevent entry into the foster care system, but its impact on foster youth outcomes depends on effective implementation.
- 2. Ensure that youth with foster care histories, including those in the juvenile justice system, are able to re-enter care and access quality independent living and after care services.** Although the foster care system has expanded support services to 21, and more recently to 23, transition-age foster youth often leave the system prior to aging out, abandoning supports and services that could assist them in transitioning to adulthood and avoiding homelessness. Cross-over youth who are involved in both the foster care and juvenile justice systems are at a heightened risk of losing access to supportive services when they exit the justice system. In order to broaden access to independent living and after care services, both child welfare and juvenile justice staff should participate in regular case conferencing to identify housing and other supportive services for youth who have exited into homelessness, or are at risk of future homelessness.
- 3. Require regular data review for dually-involved youth.** The Maryland's Child Juvenile & Adult Management System (CJAMS) is a joint data management system that will bring together data from the Department of Social Services (DHS) and the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS), helping to link child welfare data, juvenile services and adult services data. With an integrated data system, DJS and DHS can better monitor service provision to dually-involved youth over time. However, effective monitoring requires regular data review and use. To fully benefit from CJAMS, each jurisdiction should identify a data person responsible for analyzing the data and a standard presentation (such as a data dashboard tracking the housing, employment and education status of youth exiting both child welfare and juvenile services) for routine review at the case conference for youth experiencing homelessness.
- 4. Expand access to Family Unification Program (FUP) housing vouchers for youth exiting foster care.** FUP vouchers are designated for youth aging out of foster care as well as families in the system requiring housing support to reunify or avoid separation (Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.), but the vast majority are currently allocated to families (Loudenback, 2019). Both local housing authorities and child welfare staff should improve coordination, and participate in case conferencing to increase the allocation of FUP housing vouchers to youth exiting care who are eligible and interested in the program. There is federal legislation under consideration that would increase the funding for vouchers directly allocated to youth, and help to ensure they are allocated more effectively across jurisdictions (Loudenback, 2019), and the move to improve coordination between child welfare and housing authorities may help to prepare local communities to manage an increased caseload of former foster youth transitioning to the FUP voucher program.

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