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# Child Well-Being in Minnesota:

Higher Education and Foster Care

A policy approach for increasing access to and preparation for higher education opportunities for current and former foster youth.

Center for Advanced Studies  
in **Child Welfare**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

## What is the Field of Child Welfare?

The child welfare field includes human services in the areas of child protection, foster care, and adoption. This work is carried out in a state supervised, county administered system by government as well as non-profit agencies, and tribal units, and is supported by research and evaluation from government, tribal, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations. The collective goal of child welfare is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families.

## Negative Outcomes of Aging Out of Foster Care

Every year in the United States, more than 23,000 youth<sup>1</sup> will age out of foster care at the age of 18 without a permanent home or family. Over the last decade an increasingly large body of research has emerged showing an association between aging out of care and negative outcomes for foster alumni. The negative outcomes include but are not limited to homelessness, teenage pregnancy, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Table 1)<sup>2</sup>. These negative outcomes are further compounded by adolescent brain development research showing that the average age an adult is able to sustain independence is 26 years. Without thoughtful transition planning and support, these youth face innumerable challenges upon aging out<sup>3</sup>.

**Table 1. A comparison of outcomes between youth who had spent time in foster care and those in the general population at ages 23 and 24<sup>4</sup>**

Outcome	Foster Care	General Population
Currently employed	48%	76%
Average income from employment	\$12,064	\$20,349
Have medical insurance	57%	78%
Males who have been arrested	81.2%	17.4%
Currently incarcerated	7% (all male)	0.1%
Females who have been pregnant	77%	40.4%
Have ever been homeless/couch surfed	36.5%	--

## Current Federal Policy Supporting Youth Aging Out of Care

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program ("Chafee Program") is a federal program created via the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 through which states and tribes can access funding to help older youth in foster care develop independent living skills and transition to

adulthood<sup>5</sup>. The Chafee Program's Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV) Program also provides up to \$5,000 per academic year for eligible current and former foster youth to attend college<sup>6</sup>.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 ("Fostering Connections")<sup>7</sup> provided federal funding for state implementation of extended foster care. This optional program allows youth to remain in foster care until age 21, thereby helping to circumvent some of the negative outcomes that are typically associated with aging out of foster care.

While all states are able to provide some extended services via the Chafee Program, as of May 2014, only 19 states (including Minnesota) had implemented the federally funded extended foster care option through Fostering Connections, with a majority of these states covering all 5 eligibility conditions for remaining in care after age 18<sup>8</sup>.

## Spotlight on Minnesota

Minnesota implemented extended foster care covering all five eligibility conditions in September 2010<sup>9</sup>. In its first two years, nearly 1,900 youth remained in extended foster care or returned after they exited care; of these foster youth, 454 elected to remain living in a supervised independent living setting<sup>10</sup>.

Current and former foster youth in Minnesota can access Chafee Program funds through Minnesota's Support for Emancipation and Living Functionally (SELF) Program<sup>11</sup>. Counties and tribes apply for SELF funds annually, based on the number of eligible youth under their jurisdiction. Youth must meet one of the Chafee Program eligibility criteria in order to use SELF funds (e.g., at least 14 years old and likely to age out of care, or left care due to adoption or legal guardianship between the ages of 16 and 21). The state's ETV program also follows Chafee Program ETV eligibility criteria: In order to receive ETV funds, youth must apply before the age of 21 and either/was adopted/had a relative accept a transfer of legal custody on or after the youth's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>12</sup> or were in state custody at the age of 18.

## Higher Education Among Current & Former Foster Youth

Researchers project that former foster youth can expect to earn \$481,000 more over their work life with a college degree than with only a high school diploma<sup>13</sup>. Unfortunately, major education deficits persist in adults who have transitioned out of the foster care system without a permanent home. A 2010 study from Chapin Hall found that of the 37.4% of foster alumni who completed at least 1 year of college by age 23 or 24, only 16% had actually graduated with either an associate's or bachelor's degree by this age, which amounts to about 6% of all foster alumni in the study<sup>14</sup>.

The Chapin Hall study also found that financial support is not enough to help foster alumni overcome barriers to collegiate success. Pecora et al. (2006) estimated that less than one

third of youth exiting foster care do not possess the basic resources such as a driver's license, financial resources, or basic household necessities needed to be successful in life, let alone college<sup>15</sup>.

## Youth Leave Foster Care Inadequately Prepared for College

**Policy Issue:** Due to their past maltreatment history, as well as other prevalent issues found among youth in foster care (e.g., placement instability, school mobility, poverty, and mental health concerns), children and youth in foster care often have poorer academic progress during their school years than their peers<sup>16</sup>. Additionally, youth who age out of foster care are often unprepared for college as a result of their educational and foster care history, inadequate transitions to independent living, and lack of caring adults (and words of encouragement) in their lives<sup>17</sup>. While Minnesota recently passed a law aimed to promote K-12 educational stability for youth in foster care<sup>18</sup>, more is needed to ensure postsecondary educational success once youth leave care.

In Minnesota, foster youth who are in the custody of the county, tribes, or State and who are at least 14 years of age are required to have an Independent Living Plan (ILP) in place<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, federal law requires that 90 days prior to leaving foster care at age 18 or older, youth and their child welfare workers must jointly complete transition plans separate from existing ILPs<sup>20</sup>. Both of these plans must address future education and employment/career goals. While both plans serve to help lessen the negative impact of transitioning to adulthood while encouraging youth to think about their future, research at the national level has shown that transition planning is sometimes inadequate for youth due to large caseloads, not enough resources within the community, and not enough time<sup>21</sup>.

**Policy Solution:** Minnesota statute currently requires a worker to complete 15 hours of continuing education annually that is relevant to the services they provide<sup>22</sup>. Minnesota's Child Welfare Training System could be expanded to include additional training for practitioners who work with youth ages 14 and older on completing ILPs and transition plans that consider the unique educational and training needs of each youth, based on the youth's job and career goals, as well as emphasize the importance of encouragement and support in a youth's postsecondary educational success<sup>23</sup>.

Counties and tribes could also consider partnering with college preparation programs that work with at-risk youth currently in high school to develop special cohorts consisting of youth currently and formerly in foster care. For example, a federal TRIO program called Upward Bound works with high school youth from groups traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education, including youth in and aging out of foster care. Their goal is "to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education."<sup>24</sup> This real-life experience, combined with the additional training on education planning, could serve to enhance youth preparation for and reduce barriers to postsecondary educational success.

## Age and Funding Limits for Federal Financial Support Pose a Barrier to College for Foster Alumni

**Policy Issue:** As part of a string of federal policies intended to improve outcomes for foster alumni, Chafee's ETV program provides financial assistance for youth attending post-secondary education programs. However, funding is limited up to \$5,000 per year, and with the rising cost of tuition and housing costs, \$5,000 per year may not be enough for foster alumni to remain enrolled at and graduate from post-secondary education programs.

Additionally, in order to receive the ETV, youth must apply before age 21 and they may only receive it until age 23. This presumes that eligible current and former foster youth graduate from high school around age 18, immediately enroll in college, and graduate within 4 years—the traditional college pathway. Unfortunately, studies show that current and former foster youth are less likely to follow this traditional route<sup>25</sup>.

Other financial aid options—student loans, Minnesota State Grant, Federal Pell Grant<sup>26</sup>—may not be accessible to current and former foster youth due to lack of supportive adults to assist with the complicated application processes, low credit rating, or the time-limited availability for receiving grants.

**Policy Solution:** There has been some talk at the federal level about modifying eligibility criteria for federal programs<sup>27</sup>, but Minnesota could also address this at the state level. Minnesota law allows the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system to waive tuition for certain groups; currently MnSCU waives tuition for state wards (youth under the guardianship of the commissioner) between ages 18 and 21<sup>28</sup> and recently the tuition waiver was amended to include American Indian youth under suspension of parental rights/tribal guardianship. Students can also petition the college for continuation of the waiver until their program is completed. The Minnesota legislature could revise this policy to require the waiver to be applicable over a certain period of time (for example, 4 or 5 years) rather than between a certain age range. It is also state policy that persons in post-secondary education programs who are at least 21 and have made progress toward completion of their program, but not finished, may petition their school to continue the waiver until they have completed the program. Decisions for this waiver extension are at the discretion of the head of the post-secondary education program. Other colleges and universities across the state could seek to enact such a policy of their own, perhaps expanding it to include all youth who age out of foster care. By implementing tuition waiver policies and modifying eligibility requirements to cover a span of time rather than age, current and former foster youth would be able to attend post-secondary education programs at their own pace<sup>29</sup>.

## Foster Alumni Are Not Graduating From College

**Policy Issue:** In addition to being unprepared both academically and emotionally, current and former foster youth who enroll in post-secondary education programs face a variety of external challenges to maintaining enrollment and completing college. Homelessness and housing instability are very real barriers.



While Minnesota gives youth the option of remaining in foster care until age 21, not all youth elect to remain in care. Residence halls often close during term breaks, local community colleges may not offer housing, and off-campus housing may be unaffordable<sup>30</sup>.

Moreover, a large percentage of foster youth who age out of care experience economic hardship, requiring them to work while attending college<sup>31</sup>. In fact, MnSCU's tuition waiver program for state wards requires recipients to be "gainfully employed if they are able to work." Yet in the Midwest Study, "not having enough money to pay for school" and "needing to work full time" were cited as two of the biggest barriers current and former foster youth faced in continuing their education<sup>32</sup>.

**Policy Solution:** In order for current and former foster youth to succeed in post-secondary education programs, they need more than financial support for tuition. Non-financial supportive services can include, but are not limited to, money management training, career counseling, and access to a supportive network. Research has also shown that guidance of a mentor has helped youth to access these programs during college<sup>33</sup>.

The state of Minnesota could work with universities to establish a support or mentorship program on campus for current and former foster youth, similar to one of the college support programs featured in this policy brief. There are several national resources that provide guidance on developing and maintaining a comprehensive support system for current and former foster youth on college campuses; see Texas Reach's Campus Connections guide as an example<sup>34</sup>.

In addition, the state of Minnesota could utilize the youth connectedness funding option of the state's SELF to help support the mentorship component of any state-university partnership agreement. Using SELF program funds to help current and former foster youth identify a collegiate mentor at the college or university of their choice may help provide a needed support person to help these youth overcome challenges while enrolled in post-secondary education settings.

## Creating a Brighter Future for Current and Former Foster Youth

Minnesota-based non-profits are developing a mentorship and scholarship program to increase post-secondary education program success rates for Minnesota youth in foster care. College Possible and Wallin Education Partners, with the financial support of the Bentson Foundation, will offer continuous coaching and mentoring services from high school through college completion for youth aging out of foster care.

Foster youth joining the collaborative program will begin with an AmeriCorps college success coach in 11th grade through the College Possible high school program. Students will then gain the financial support and additional guidance of the Wallin Education Partners program upon enrollment in college. College Possible and Wallin Education Partners will be working with partner colleges and universities to secure housing and financial support in a joint effort to increase persistence and graduation rates among former foster youth.

Once cohort students enroll in college, they will gain an additional adviser through Wallin Education Partners, access to ongoing career preparation and financial literacy support, and a renewable scholarship to help minimize or eliminate college debt.

For more information on this new initiative, contact either College Possible ([www.collegepossible.org](http://www.collegepossible.org)) or Wallin Education Partners ([www.wallinpartners.org](http://www.wallinpartners.org)).

Minnesota has also recently added a new program called "Planning for Students' Successful Transition to Postsecondary Education and Employment". This program will require all students to develop a plan that explores their educational, college, and career interests and aptitudes. This plan must be in place by the time the student reaches ninth grade.<sup>35</sup>

## College Support Programs Across the Country

### Seita Scholars, Western Michigan University

In addition to providing a renewable tuition scholarship until the undergraduate degree is completed, the Seita Scholars Program utilizes campus coaches, career mentors, and peer support to foster a sense of community at WMU for foster alumni. Targeted life skills training, opportunities for peer leadership and public speaking, and safe housing during term breaks are other benefits of the program.

More information: <http://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/seita>

### Guardian Scholars Program, UCLA

This program provides support to foster alumni. Highlights of the program are individual mentoring, access to safe housing during term breaks, referrals to support services in the campus and community, monthly workshops, and community-building social events and student groups.

No age or term limits are noted. More information:

<http://www.guardianscholars.ucla.edu/>

### North Carolina REACH, State of North Carolina

Youth must have aged out of North Carolina foster care at age 18 or been adopted from foster care after age 11 in order to be eligible for this state-funded scholarship. Funding is received for up to 4 years and up until age 25, and can be used for tuition and fees, on- and off-campus housing and meals, books, supplies, transportation, and child care. The program also provides mentors, care packages, and internships for foster alumni. More information:

<http://www.ncreach.org/>

### Passport for Foster Youth, State of Washington

This state program provides policy and programmatic support at the state and campus levels to promote higher education completion among foster alumni, as well as a direct scholarship to foster alumni. The program aims to enhance the ability of colleges to support foster alumni on their campuses, as well as to provide support to high school students interested in postsecondary education. More information:

<http://www.wsac.wa.gov/passport-foster-youth>

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## Evidence-Based Policy Solutions

CASCW urges your support of evidence-based policy solutions and promotes the following criteria as a guide to the selection of policies that will improve child safety and well-being:<sup>1</sup>

1. Demonstrate effectiveness in research, evaluation, or other studies;
2. Are supported by collective wisdom of practitioners from the field;
3. Address children and families with the poorest outcomes;

4. Possess sufficient scope and scale to address the outcome;
5. Are politically and administratively feasible; and
6. Are compatible with the values and assumptions of a family-strengthening perspective.

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## CASCW Resources

Learn about and download CASCW's Youth Connections Scale for working with older youth in foster care: <http://z.umn.edu/y/cs>

Watch out for the Well-being Indicator Tool for Youth (WIT-Y), an online well-being assessment created in partnership with Anu Family Services for youth involved in child protection. This will be posted on CASCW's website during Winter 2016: <http://cascw.umn.edu>

View CASCW's resources on adolescents in foster care: [http://cascw.umn.edu/portfolio\\_tags/adolescents/](http://cascw.umn.edu/portfolio_tags/adolescents/)

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## Resources for Further Information and Continued Education

Learn about the Supporting Success initiative from Casey Family Programs: <http://www.casey.org/supporting-success/>

Check out national and state resources on higher education and foster care: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/support/education/>

View state legislation related to higher education and youth in foster care: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/educating-children-in-foster-care-state-legis.aspx>

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**The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW)** is a nonpartisan research and training center at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work. CASCW's mission is to improve the well-being of children and families who are involved in the child welfare system by: educating human service professionals, fostering collaboration across systems and disciplines, informing policymakers and the public, and expanding the child welfare knowledge base.

CASCW does not take partisan positions nor do we advocate for or against specific bills. Instead, CASCW offers background data, theory, and evidence-based practices that may be helpful to you as you consider these issues.

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