



**Written Testimony of the
National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators**

**Before the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support
Ways and Means Committee
U.S. House of Representatives**

Hearing on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

August 2, 2007

Youth Aging Out

This testimony is presented to the Committee on Income Security and Family Support on behalf of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA), an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) in response to the July 12 hearing on youth who age out of the foster care system. APHSA is a nonprofit, bipartisan organization representing state and local human service professionals for over 77 years. NAPCWA, created as an affiliate in 1983, works to enhance and improve public policy and administration of services for children, youth, and families. As the only organization devoted solely to representing administrators of state and local public child welfare agencies, NAPCWA brings an informed view of the problems facing families today to the forefront of child welfare policy.

Older youth may leave the foster care system via reunification, adoption, guardianship, running away, or aging out. Youth “age out” when they reach the age of majority (18) while in care, although some states continue some services until the age of 21. Youth aging out of foster care have significantly higher needs than their peers outside the foster care system. The lack of residential and educational stability, the lack of stable support from caring adults, and involvement in many different service systems are just a few of the major traumas that youth coming out of foster care face. Twenty to 60 percent of youth entering the foster care system have developmental disabilities of some kind compared to 10 percent in the general population. Studies also show that 30 to 40 percent of youth coming out of the foster care system are enrolled in special education courses based on the diagnosis of a learning disorder or emotional impairment. As youth attempt their transition to adult support systems, such as adult education, mental health, social security, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce development, they are faced with a variety of eligibility requirements, leading to frustration, and often fail to successfully engage in services.

Youth aging out of foster care has been an important state issue for several years. Recent research regarding the severity of their needs and the lack of positive outcomes once they have left the system have led states to engage in a series of initiatives and research practices in order to better serve this population. According to states, housing, education, employment, and permanency connections are the largest barriers that youth exiting foster care encounter. Currently, federal resources made available by the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FICA) and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) help support states in serving these youth. A variety of successful initiatives and demonstration projects have begun to lead to more successful transitions for youth, but the continuing challenges of limited funding and federal requirements have created a difficult environment for states to succeed in serving youth as they age out of the foster care system.

Eighteen to twenty thousand youth age out of the foster care system each year, a significant population of young adults. These young adults are more likely to end up homeless, in the criminal system, pregnant, unemployed, and requiring life-long state support. Effective prevention and transitional programs can support youth exiting the

foster care system as they enter adulthood to ensure that they are safe, prepared, and have access to essential services.

Housing

As youth age out of the foster care system, one of their greatest challenges is finding appropriate and affordable housing. Youth aging out of foster care are 25 percent more likely than their peers to end up homeless. A study of youth in the Midwest region of the country found that 14 percent of youth had been homeless shortly after leaving foster care and 53 percent of those youth had been homeless more than once. In urban areas, there is a limited amount of affordable housing for a stable, working adult, let alone a young adult with limited income. In rural areas, youth struggle to find housing, especially in close proximity to their service providers. Youth who attend college are also faced with the challenge of finding affordable housing near a community college, or finding a place to stay during summers and on breaks if living in a dormitory.

The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is one resource states may use to help homeless children and families. Unfortunately, in order to qualify for limited HUD vouchers and assistance, youth must first meet the HUD definition of homelessness, “a person sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets or in an emergency shelter), or residing in an emergency shelter, transitional housing, or other supportive housing program.” Because states are legally responsible for housing youth in their care, foster youth are not eligible for HUD funding and assistance unless they have been emancipated or have access to targeted funding. HUD eligibility requirements should be altered to intervene before homelessness occurs and categorically extend to youth who are aging out the foster care system.

Several states have convened state-level task forces to develop plans addressing the needs of youth aging out of foster care. In Michigan, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority awarded \$3 million in grants to programs providing transitional and supportive housing for youth aging out of foster care. Massachusetts also partnered with their housing authority to provide 23 rental vouchers to youth aging out.

Another major housing issue facing youth in transition is that they often require substantial supports in order to be successful at living independently. Several projects are underway in states throughout the country that provide housing and support services for youth aging out of the system. These programs often provide a full continuum of supports for youth, including on-site GED courses, college and career preparation, mental health services, mentors, employment training and internship opportunities, life skills courses, and general case management. Young mothers also have separate support needs, such as child care and parenting, which traditional housing programs fail to provide. Although several projects throughout the country provide housing and support services for youth aging out of the system, meeting the full need for these services poses implementation and funding challenges for states.

States are also utilizing the Chafee Program’s Educational Training Vouchers in a variety of creative ways in order to supplement housing expenses. In Iowa, for example,

Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) legislation was passed that allows subsidies of up to \$540 per month for youth aging out of foster care. The state child welfare system also has a rent subsidy program in collaboration with the Iowa Finance Authority.

These programs have been extremely successful in helping youth make the transition to independence, but they require a great deal of supplemental private funding sources as state and federal funds are extremely limited. Research has demonstrated what youth need to be successful in this transition, but barriers persist for states and providers of these services. As states continue to utilize innovation and collaboration in order to solve the housing issues for youth aging out of foster care, they will need to rely on congressional and federal government support.

Employment

The employment challenges youth face as they age out of the foster care system can ultimately place them at higher risk for negative outcomes, such as criminal behaviors and victimization, and homelessness if they prove unsuccessful in making the transition to economic self-sufficiency. Studies have shown that the employment rate of former foster youth tends to be lower than that of the general population. Often, the health and mental health needs of foster youth can further complicate their search for employment. Youth may be involved in multiple entitlement programs, such as Vocational Rehabilitation or Social Security, and often fear that their cash assistance and health benefits will be sacrificed if they become employed.

Many states have implemented internship programs to improve employment outcomes for youth as they leave the foster care system. Both Massachusetts and Michigan have developed a statewide outreach program funded by the Chafee Program that engages employers and former foster youth to facilitate internship and future employment opportunities. These initiatives, which begin working with youth while they are still involved in the foster care system, have also served to build mentoring relationships between youth and members of the business community.

Collaboration with the federal Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration has afforded several states the opportunity to design and implement programs that enhance self-sufficiency and improve employment outcomes for youth exiting the foster care system. In 2004, demonstration grants were awarded to five areas with large foster care populations—Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, and Houston. The grant projects embody a holistic approach to increasing the employability of former foster youth. Program participants are offered exposure to work internships, secondary and post-secondary education, English as a second language classes, job and college preparation, mentoring, and life skills classes. Evaluations have shown the success of these programs in reaching employment and educational enrollment, placement, and retention goals. Several states, including Michigan, New York, and California have leveraged funding from other sources to sustain and replicate their demonstration projects.

Local collaboration efforts have also shown promise in supporting youth employment prospects as they age out of the foster care system. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has recognized a motion to have its 42 municipal departments draw at least 5 percent of their new hires in the next year from the population of former foster youth. Another opportunity for local collaboration involves states offering tax incentives to local business owners who seek to employ former foster youth.

Education

The transition from high school to college is daunting for all adolescents; for former foster youth a successful transition to the higher education system involves a host of issues and needs beyond those of the general population. Older youth within the foster care system already face multiple educational challenges. They are more likely to be involved in special education and to complete high school with a GED. If foster youth completed high school and entered post-secondary education at the same rate as their peers, approximately 100,000 additional former foster youth would be attending colleges or technical schools. Currently, only 30,000 are enrolled in post-secondary education.

In addition, research has shown that former foster youth have significantly lower rates of post-secondary retention and completion. According to Casey Family Programs, while 70 percent of youth who emancipate from foster care plan to attend college, only 37 percent do attend (compared to 51 percent of the general population). Of these youth, only 3 percent actually completed a bachelor's degree, compared to 28 percent for 25- to 34-year olds in the general population.

Having access to information and resources to successfully search for and identify post-secondary educational opportunities is a challenge for older foster youth preparing to age out of the system. This year, Washington State has introduced the Passport to College program. This initiative will create a program that significantly increases outreach to foster care youth between the ages of 15 and 18 to educate them about available higher education opportunities, how to apply to college, and how to obtain financial aid. The Michigan Department of Human Services has also recently held an educational summit with state, community, and trade colleges to learn more about successful outreach and support to foster youth entering their programs of study, and the response from schools was overwhelmingly positive.

Financial need is a significant barrier to former foster youth successfully entering and completing higher education programs. While Education and Training Vouchers offered under the Chaffee Program offer some assistance with education and living expenses, they do not begin to sufficiently address all of the financial needs and gaps former foster youth experience while pursuing higher education. Housing is a particularly significant need for youth who attend college. They often struggle to obtain housing for the academic year, and then face the additional hurdle of maintaining this resource throughout the summer, and during school holidays. It is common for former foster youth to enroll in summer school in order to ensure stable housing. This may result in jeopardizing their academic success due to increasing rates of fatigue and burn out.

Offering needed support services to former foster youth once they are enrolled in post-secondary programs is also critical. Student orientation programs tailored to the specific needs of this population have proven successful, while other state university systems offer foster youth access to additional academic, mentoring, health, and mental health supports to increase their opportunities for successful completion of their degree or program.

Permanency Connections

One of the greatest challenges for youth aging out of foster care is the lack of a permanent connection with a family member, relative, or other caring adult. Youth who age out of the system have spent an average of almost five years in the system at their time of emancipation without being placed with a safe, permanent family. Many youth who live with foster families are required to leave those families when they turn 18 and are left to care for themselves. A large number of youth spend many years in the foster care system, experience numerous placements and repeated disruptions in their education. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study found that more than 30 percent of youth in foster care experience eight or more placements during their time in care, and 65 percent experienced seven or more school changes. Consequently, youth who age out of the system are often disconnected from family and social networks. The Pew Charitable Trusts recently reported that youth overwhelmingly want to stay connected with family and friends, both while in care and after they have aged out.

Youth who age out of the foster care system without connections to family or other caring adults quickly face many challenging realities of life with little or no resources. For example, parents, on average, spend \$44,500 on their children after they have turned 18. Youth who age out of the system without a permanent family lack this type of financial support, which has the potential to create great difficulties and challenges for them. Moreover, positive connections to family and friends generate a sense of security and reassurance for children and adults alike, and youth who age out and are disconnected are more likely to experience frustrations and disruptions than those who are connected before they age out. They face challenges regarding money, housing, food, and other life necessities, and these difficulties are magnified when there is no one to turn to for support, guidance, and help.

Several states have employed a variety of effective and innovative programs to address the problem of establishing and maintaining permanency connections for youth aging out of foster care. Los Angeles County, for example, is planning a conference with youth, caretakers, Children's Social Workers, and Transitional Independent Living Coordinators to explore permanency options for youth, address the possibility of a mentor and explore extracurricular activities for youth that might connect them with a community or caring adult. They also work closely with their Kinship Division to ensure that relative providers are aware of services and resources for youth in their care. In Hawaii, family and permanency connections are a high priority. They plan to convene stakeholders across the state to address and reinforce the importance of family, connections, and creating transition plans for youth with a specific focus on family and permanency issues. In 2004, Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare established a collaborative partnership

between the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) and Independent Living Services (IL) that helps youth identify potential permanency resources and establish supportive relationships with an adult who will continue to provide them with the guidance, support, and advice they need.

Connecticut has implemented an annual planning conference for youth age 14 and over and a mandatory planning conference six months prior to youth leaving care from ages 18 to 23. One of the requirements of the meeting is that names and contact information for at least three significant family members or adults in the youth's "network" be included and defined in their discharge plan. Recently, the state Bureau of Adolescent Services created a position that focuses specifically on sibling and lifelong connections. Texas has implemented a Circles of Support (COS) program that promotes youth connection and reconnection with biological parents, relative, and fictive kin, is offered to youth in care at age 16. This initiative allows youth to identify "caring adults" (relatives, foster care providers, teachers, church members, mentors, and others) that make up their support system and bring them together to participate collectively in the youth's transition plan. Each caring adult also identifies in a personal way how they can help support the youth's transition plan. These and other state initiatives are vital to establishing permanent connections for youth aging out of the system.

Youth in Transition Database and Center for State Foster Care and Adoption Data
Reliable, valid, and consistently collected data are critical to addressing the needs and tracking the outcomes of youth aging out of foster care. One of the provisions of the Chafee Program requires that the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) develop a data collection system that tracks the number and characteristics of youth who receive independent living services, the type and quantity of state-provided services, and performance of outcome measures for youth who are aging out of the foster care system. We urge Congress to continue to engage state child welfare administrators, state independent living coordinators, service providers, foster parents and youth, and advocates in the process of developing the data elements, indicators, and outcomes that will comprise this database. We also urge Congress to ensure funding, by increased appropriation to prevent detracting resources from current programs, for database development and data collection

It is equally important to collect data on older youth while they are still in the foster care system. A recent study by Chapin Hall underscores the importance of ongoing data collection for the design and implementation of transition programs for youth aging out of care. The study found that the highest number of young people still in care at age 18 entered the foster care system in late adolescence. This means that as states continue to struggle to improve outcomes for youth who are transitioning out of care, they will be well-served to examine the range of services and program models available to older youth in laying a foundation for positive experiences in their early adult lives.

The Center for State Foster Care and Adoption Data exists as a resource to bring state child welfare agencies cutting-edge information technology for performance measurement and outcome evaluation. Established in January 2004, it is a collaborative

partnership of the APHSA, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, the Jordan Institute for Families at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill and the Center for Social Services Research at University of California at Berkeley. Currently, 11 states subscribe to the Center—Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Washington. Six additional states are in the process of becoming subscribers. The center’s database contains information on approximately 60 percent of the children in the public child welfare system.

The center’s longitudinal database was developed at Chapin Hall, one of the country’s leading centers for research on child welfare. The center’s pioneering information management tools provide agencies with an evidence base to assess their program initiatives and monitor the impact of innovation.

The center’s unique longitudinal database gives states the powerful capacity to:

- Analyze key child welfare outcomes: time to reunification, time to adoption, placement stability, and re-entry to care;
- Compare outcomes for different administrative offices within their state to other states;
- Trace outcomes from the aggregate to the individual child level;
- Project future service patterns based on historical trends;
- Test the impact of service and policy innovations;
- Set performance goals and monitor progress; and
- Link financial decision-making to outcome measures.

Longitudinal data are essential for tracking change over time and measuring agency performance and outcomes. Access to and use of the center’s longitudinal database and software analysis tools allow its member states to accurately measure and understand change over time, use data to support the agency decision making process and provide a framework for critical analysis and evaluation of agency performance.

Recommendations

Youth exiting the foster care system do so with significantly higher levels of need than their non-foster care counterparts in the areas of health, mental health, and physical and developmental disabilities. Very often, their experiences in the foster care system have contributed to or exacerbated their needs. One in four youth aging out of the foster care system experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This population will require additional support services as they develop independence and self-sufficiency in the areas of housing, education, employment, and permanency connections.

Collaborative relationships between federal agencies and states, and between states and local service entities, offer innovative and effective ways of supporting youth aging out of foster care. We have discussed partnerships between states and federal agencies such as the Department of Labor, and we urge Congress to continue making these partnerships available to states. In addition, we recommend that additional collaborative relationships be explored between state child welfare departments and federal departments, including

the Department of Labor, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Education, and the Department of Transportation.

In order to provide better services for youth aging out of foster care, states and several partners are calling on the 110th Congress to adopt financing reforms that will allow support for the full range of services necessary to prevent child abuse and neglect; ensure that all children who have been abused and neglected, including those in foster care, have the services and supports they need to heal; and guarantee the more than half a million children in foster care the help they need not just to survive, but to thrive and return to their families, or to live permanently with adoptive families or legal guardians. The partners in this recommendation include AHPA, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; Catholic Charities USA; the Center for Law and Social Policy; the Child Welfare League of America; the Children's Defense Fund; the National Child Abuse Coalition; and Voices for America's Children.

In order to facilitate more prevention services for older youth, states that have safely reduced the number of children entering foster care should be able to retain unspent Title IV-E funds that otherwise would have served these children and reinvest them in prevention. Congress could eliminate Title IV-E's income eligibility criteria so that all children are eligible for the funding support. Title IV-E of the Social Security Act can be amended so that the funds can also be utilized to provide post-permanency supports and services. IV-E training funds should be able to be used for training on all topics relevant to ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being for children and training for all staff who work with children. The Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) federal match should also be increased from 50 percent to allow for increased capacity at the state level.

We also strongly recommend that Congress remain aware of the heightened level of need among the population of youth exiting the foster care system and offer resources that will support their successful transition into adulthood. State child welfare systems continue to enhance their abilities to establish community and familial connections to help support these youth as they become more independent. However, additional financial and service resources are necessary to create community- and state-wide webs of support that will sustain this fragile population as they make a successful transition to adulthood.

We appreciate the opportunity to present this testimony and we are happy to answer any questions you might have.