

Finding a Family for a Lifetime Aging Out of the Foster Care System

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Everyone needs the support and love of a family, regardless of age. Throughout our lives, we depend on our families in both good times and bad. They help us through the bad times such as illness or loss of a job, and they help us celebrate the good times such as birthdays and graduations. Unfortunately, over 200 Arkansas children left foster care last year without ever finding that support. These children turned 18 and “aged out” of the child welfare system. The state is no longer responsible for their care. At this point, they have to tackle life on their own.

While many of these children have learned to be resourceful, they do not have the support of a family to teach them skills and help with the transition to adulthood. Research shows that children who age out of the system without a permanent family are more likely to experience a myriad of problems such as pregnancy and parenthood at an early age, homelessness, lack of a high school education, unemployment, criminal involvement, and mental health issues.¹

Last year over 200 children aged out of the Arkansas foster care system without a permanent family.

Very few of us are ready to tackle the world at the age of 18, in fact, census data show that a majority of young adults continue to live with their parents.² Our families provide not only emotional support, but financial support as we continue with our education, or work in low paying entry level jobs that do not pay enough for groceries, rent, medical care, and other basic needs. For foster children age 14 to 17, the Division of Children and Family Services offers the Independent Living Program that provides some of this support in the form of resources for basic life skills training. A limited amount of after-care services are available to children who have reached 18, including assistance with finding a place to live. There is also limited funding available for help with college or vocational school tuition, or a GED program.

Unfortunately, there is not enough money for all who apply to continue their education. In this report, we provide a series of recommendations that include providing more funding for education and the following:

- Ensure that no child ages out of the system without permanent relationships with supportive adults.
- Enhance life skills training to make sure all areas of the state can provide comprehensive training to prepare these children for adulthood.
- Make sure all children receive a basic-life skills initial assessment and re-assessment every six months.
- Expand Medicaid, as allowed by federal law, to include former foster children through their 21st birthday so that they have access to health care.
- Make sure that all children are involved in all aspects of their planning.

All children deserve a family for a lifetime. It is up to all of us to encourage policymakers and state officials to do more for these children.



INTRODUCTION

Tina and Tracy are sisters who entered the Arkansas foster care system when they were 12 and 13. Their mother was in an abusive relationship and could not care for them, and their father and stepmother did not want the girls living with them anymore. The girls were abandoned and placed in the Division of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) custody. After being in shelters and foster homes, they were placed in the foster home of the Smith family, where they remained until they turned 18. Tina and Tracy consider the Smiths their family and have always introduced the Smiths as their mom and dad.

It is the ongoing relationships both between the sisters, and with the Smiths, that are of importance. Although Tracy, the older sister, has had a more difficult time after turning 18, both girls have benefited from the strong ties they have maintained with each other and those that they have formed with their foster parents. Tina continues to receive financial assistance through the child welfare system and is able to live in an apartment and attend a community college while working part-time. Tracy married early, but the girls have maintained close contact with each other and live in the same neighborhood. Tina continues to have a very close relationship with the Smiths and sees them several times a week. Even though the Smiths have younger biological children to care for, they have been able to help prepare the sisters for adulthood, and provide ongoing support after they turned 18.

Like Tina and Tracy, every child who leaves the foster care system at 18 should have permanent family connections. These connections can be with close or extended family members such as sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunt, uncles, cousins, or they can be with other supportive adults such as foster parents, teachers, or coaches who can serve as mentors. They should also be taught basic life skills such as how to cook meals, wash clothes, open a bank account, and pay bills. Unfortunately, many children who age out of the foster care system at 18 do not have these essential family or supportive adult connections or skills.

This issue brief will examine the demographics of the children who aged out of the Arkansas child welfare system last year, and discuss the services that are available to them before and after age 18. It will also suggest ways to help these children as they transition to adulthood. Our hope is that every child in the foster care system can have the necessary preparation for adulthood and find a permanent family before leaving the child welfare system. Like our own children, these children deserve a family for a lifetime.

Aging Out of the Foster Care System – Where We Are Now

The annual number of Arkansas children aging out of the foster care system without a permanent family has grown slightly over the last five state fiscal years (July – June) from 180 to 216. Even though this number represents a very small portion of the number of children in foster care in any given year, these numbers add up over time and these are the children who are most at risk. The statewide average for the length of stay in foster care for these children was three years and five months. African American children were overrepresented in the percentage of children who age out of the foster care system at 1 in 3. Thirty-five percent of the 216 children were African Americans, and according to the latest census data, African American children (0 – 18) represent 21 percent of the overall population.³

Representing just one-fifth of the child population in Arkansas, African-American kids accounted for over one-third of the child population who aged out of the foster care system.

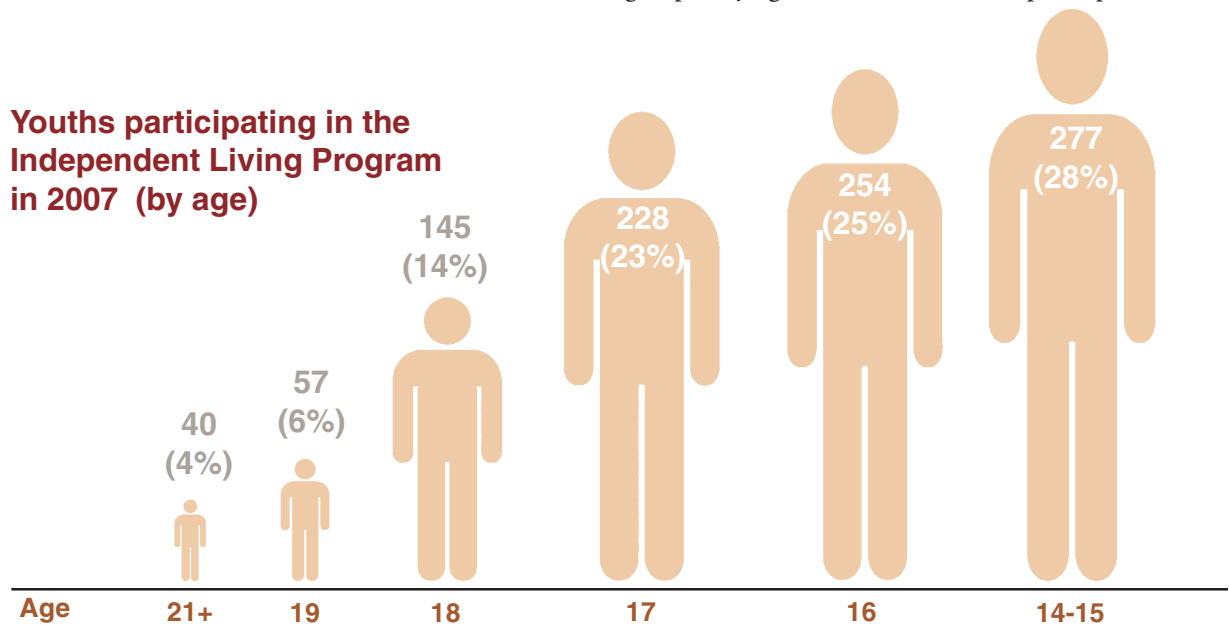
When a child is removed from his or her family and enters the foster care system, a goal is established for the case by DCFS. Depending on the circumstances of the child and family, this goal may include reunification with the birth family, guardianship or permanent custody, adoption, or another planned permanent living arrangement that includes independent living services and a plan for supervision and nurturing the child will receive. This last goal is obviously intended for older children in the system, and it means that DCFS is no longer trying to reunify them with their current families or find adoptive families. While it is important to prepare them for adulthood, DCFS should continue to try to find adoptive families for these children if they cannot be reunified. Unfortunately, only 57 of the 216 children who aged out of the foster care system had their caregivers' rights terminated, which is the first legal step that must be taken for them to even be eligible for adoption.

Independent Living

To prepare these foster children for adulthood, DCFS, like all states, has the Independent Living Program, which provides basic life skills training. To be eligible, the foster teen must be 14 years of age or older. The number of children participating in the Independent Living Program has grown from 683 to 1,001 over the last five Federal Fiscal Years (October – September). In order to participate, the child's DCFS family service worker must perform an initial assessment for basic life skills and refer the teen for such services.

According to DCFS policy, foster teens already in the system should be provided an initial assessment for basic life skills levels when they reach age 14. If a teen enters foster care after age 14, he or she should be assessed within 30 days after entry. All teens ages 16 to 17 should be reassessed at 6 month intervals after the initial assessment to determine acquisition of transitional life skills. In Federal Fiscal Year 2007, 903 assessments were completed, but it is not known how many children were actually assessed since teens between ages 16 and 17 should be reassessed each six months.

In Arkansas, children can leave foster care at the age of 18 or they have the option of remaining in care until 21, if they have a viable plan for education or treatment. In addition, if a child leaves foster care at the age of 18, he or she can return to the court's jurisdiction to receive independent living services. Below is the number of children, grouped by age from 14 to 21, who participated in the

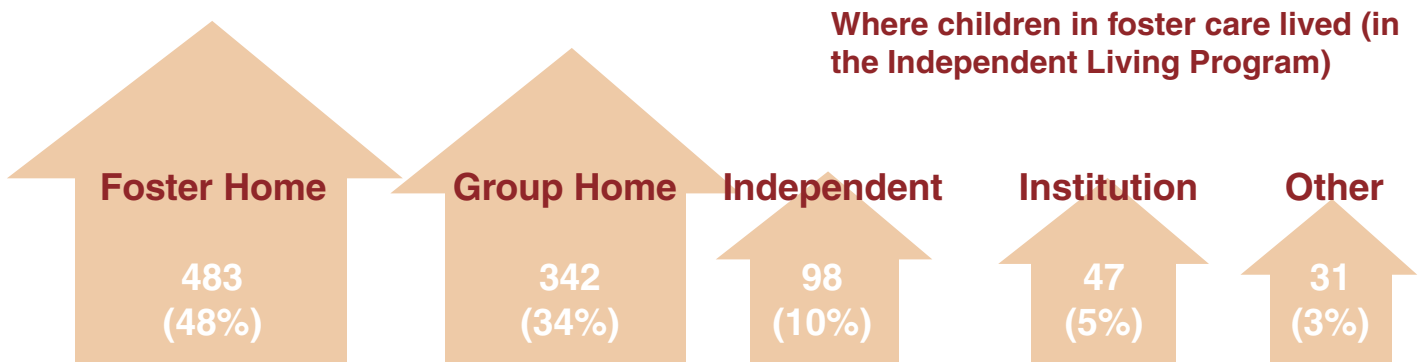


Independent Living Program in Federal Fiscal Year 2007. Once again, African Americans were over-represented. 31 percent of the 1,001 children in the independent living program were African Americans.

When examining the length of time in foster care for children in the Independent Living Program, the majority of these children, 66 percent, had been in foster care for 3 years or less. Approximately 20 percent had been in for 3 to 5 years, and 14 percent had been in the foster care system over 5 years.

The majority of these children either lived in a foster home (48 percent) or a group home (34 percent) as shown by the chart below. Compared to younger children, it is not uncommon for older children to live in group homes because many foster parents prefer younger children.

34% of kids in the independent living program have been in foster care for three years or more.



Funding for Independent Living Services

Arkansas's Independent Living Program is funded by the federal government. In 1999, the federal funding was increased through the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program for independent living activities. This increase not only provided more funding for teens 14 to 17 in foster care, but also increased assistance for young adults 18 – 21. Arkansas received \$835,131 from the federal Chafee Funds in Federal Fiscal Year 2007. Each state is required to contribute a 20 percent match, which is approximately \$167,000 for Arkansas. The match for Arkansas is in-kind and the majority comes from volunteers in communities who donate their time, services, and goods to provide the life skills training.

According to the DCFS Chafee manual, the suggested curriculum covers 15 categories. The life skills training that teens receive varies throughout the state. Since the services are donated by individuals in communities, the trainings are not uniform and each covers different categories of the curriculum depending on the expertise of the trainer. The most populous areas tend to have greater resources for training.

- 15 categories for life skills curriculum**
- Money Management/Consumer Awareness
 - Food Management
 - Personal Appearance
 - Health
 - Housekeeping
 - Transportation
 - Educational Planning
 - Job Seeking Skills
 - Job Maintenance Skills
 - Emergency and Safety Skills
 - Knowledge of Community Resources
 - Interpersonal Skills
 - Legal Skills
 - Housing
 - Other

Aftercare Services

Chafee Funds also provide a limited amount of assistance for foster teens whose case was closed on or after their 18th birthday and for teens who are adopted between ages 14 and 18 and are now between ages 18 and 21. The following are considered Aftercare Services:

- Locating affordable housing
- Counseling in money management, job search, and housekeeping
- Money for room and board
- Money for rental and utility deposits
- Money for housekeeping start-up items

Up to \$1,500 is available to help the teen pay for rent, rent deposits, and food. They can also receive an additional \$500 for start-up costs for housing. The maximum amount of housing assistance they can receive between 18 and 21 is \$2,000.

Post Secondary Education

Another separate source of federal money is available to states for post secondary education from the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program. A 20 percent state match is also required. Students can attend an in-state or out-of-state university, community college, vocational school, or GED program. Students may receive up to \$5,000 a year for tuition and books and other qualified living expenses. Arkansas received \$285,903 in federal funds for ETV in Federal Fiscal Year 2007, which was not enough to cover all those who applied.

According to DCFS for Federal Fiscal Year 2007, 86 applicants were funded. More were eligible, but DCFS did not have enough money to cover all eligible applicants. The federal government allows states that did use all of their money to request more from the unspent amount of other states. However, according to DCFS, the federal government does not have a process in place to redistribute that money, so states such as Arkansas have not been able to access it.

The ETV federal money can cover room and board, but since there is not enough money available, it does not in Arkansas. Foster care children who are receiving post-secondary assistance can receive board payments paid from state general revenue to assist with their room and board and other living expenses. This payment can be up to \$630 a month and can also assist with clothing and personal items. DCFS cannot provide how much money is spent from state general revenue for the program.

Only 86 eligible applicants were funded for post-secondary education in 2007 due to lack of funding, although many more applied.

The annual Arkansas appropriation for the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program for Federal Fiscal Year 2007 was \$835,131. Detailed information could not be provided by DCFS on how much money was spent for independent living services and aftercare services. Four broad expense categories do exist, but they do not give a clear and detailed picture of how the money is spent and DCFS cannot provide totals for all of the four categories.

Health Care

Health care coverage is another service available to children who age out of foster care. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 allows states the opportunity to extend Medicaid to former foster children, who have left care, until their 21st birthday. Arkansas does not extend Medicaid beyond the age of 18 for former foster children who have left foster care. If they remain in foster care beyond the age of 18, Arkansas extends Medicaid for up to one year, until their 19th birthday. No youth is eligible for Medicaid beyond the age of 19 in Arkansas under the current policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many reasons a child may not have a family when he ages out of foster care. Typically this occurs when a child cannot be reunified with his birth family, an adoptive family was not found, adoption or guardianship was not appropriate because of special needs or circumstances, or the child did not want to be reunified or adopted. Even if a child cannot be reunified with his family or adopted, the child still needs supportive relationships with healthy adults. Unfortunately, when the goal is another planned permanent living arrangement, there is often no concurrent plan to continue to seek permanent formal or informal family relationships for the child. A comprehensive approach is also necessary so that connections can be established with other supportive adults who can serve as mentors and provide ongoing nurturing, supervision when needed, and connections.

There are several steps that Arkansas can take to make sure that all children have permanent family relationships and services to prepare them for adulthood:

- Ensure that no child ages out of the system without permanent relationships with supportive adults. From the time the child enters care, an earnest search should be made to find connections with extended family, siblings, and other adults who can serve as mentors. One step that would improve permanent placement options would be subsidizing guardianships for relative caregivers. This provides extended family who cannot afford to take care of a child the financial support to do so.
- Ensure that funding is available for all children who want to continue their education after 18 years of age. Educational opportunities mean that these children are more likely to find jobs that will pay enough to support their basic living expenses such as rent, food, medical care, and clothing.
- Enhance life skills training by making sure all areas of the state can provide all categories of the training curriculum. DCFS should continue to work with volunteers in the community who donate their time and services to provide such trainings. The state should also make a commitment to pay for some of these services. This would ensure all categories are covered. Further, an evaluation should be done to determine the quality of the life skills training throughout the state and how many children actually receive training in all the categories that are documented in their assessments.

A comprehensive approach is necessary so that connections can be established with other supportive adults who can serve as mentors.



- Establish a system to ensure all children receive a basic life skills initial assessment and re-assessment each six months. Even though DCFS does not know the exact number, it is known that not all children who are eligible are referred to the program. Further, it is important to know how many children 16 - 17 are being re-assessed in each six month period so that an entire year does not go by without evaluating their needs.
- Expand Medicaid, as the federal law allows, to all foster children and former foster children until their 21st birthday so that they have access to health care. Continuing health care coverage will allow them to see a doctor when they are sick. Medicaid is often the only access to health care for these children as most entry level jobs do not provide insurance.
- Make sure that all children are involved in all aspects of their planning. These children need to be engaged in their permanency options so that they can weigh the pros and cons of each. It allows discussion of why the child does or does not want to be reunified or adopted. This empowers them to be part of the process and allows them to build relationships with adults involved in the planning.

In the last legislative session, a bill was passed that allows foster children under the age of 18 to obtain driver's licenses by providing that a DCFS employee or foster parent may sign the driver's license application without assuming personal liability. Instead, DCFS will assume the liability. Before this change, it was difficult for a foster child to obtain a driver's license, because the adult who signed the application could be held liable for any negligence or damages caused by the foster child while driving. Now the State will assume the liability. This important change will allow more foster children to learn an important skill, helping them to become more independent. Both DCFS and the legislature are to be commended.

More should be done so that all children have the necessary skills to assist them in the transition to adulthood and enable them to establish permanent family relationships. All children deserve a family for a lifetime. It is up to all of us to encourage policymakers and state officials to provide services and resources to make this possible.

Endnotes

^[1] Avery, Rosemary and Madelyn Freundlich (2003). *Deleterious Consequences of Aging Out of Foster Care*, National Convening on Youth Permanence, Summary Report, 2003.

^[2] *Population Profile of the United States: 2005; Families and Living Arrangements in 2005* [Updated May 2007].” U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Division and Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division*. <http://www.census.gov/population/pop-profile/dynamic/FamiliesLA.pdf>

^[3] U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

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