POSITIVE TRANSITIONS for Youth in Foster Care: Preventing Homelessness

REVIEW DRAFT
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth homelessness is a tragedy, and one that casts a long shadow. Young people who experience homelessness are significantly more likely than their peers to experience negative life outcomes including sexual victimization, abuse, suicide, poor physical health, substance abuse, gang involvement, chronic homelessness as an adult, and early death. While there are many factors involved in youth becoming homeless, experience with foster care is a significant predictor of future homelessness. Conservative estimates suggest that as many as one in five youth will become homeless after exiting foster care.

Oregon has one of the highest rates of placement in foster care in the country, and Multnomah County has a foster care rate almost three times the national average. As recently as 2009, 40 percent of youth entering the Multnomah County Homeless Youth Continuum indicated foster care experience.

New Avenues for Youth, a direct service provider for youth who are homeless and at risk for homelessness, undertook a project in collaboration with the School of Social Work at Portland State University to better understand why youth become homeless and study current child welfare reform efforts in order to plot the most strategic course for informing and influencing policy and practice related to supporting youth in foster care in making successful transitions to adulthood.

This report summarizes findings from existing literature on the child welfare system, with a specific focus on transition aged youth; current Oregon policies and practices related to transition aged youth in the child welfare system; interviews with more than 40 child welfare professionals and community members through in-depth interviews; and outreach to youth who have transitioned from the foster care system in Oregon (some to homelessness).

Overall, we discovered that our community is generally aligned around the core issues that impact foster youth as they reach transition age. The social services continuum as a whole is stretched thin. As the child welfare system shifts toward prevention and early family intervention—thereby preventing youth entering foster care—the youth that are currently in the system are at high risk to slip through the cracks of a somewhat fragmented system.

Our goal in undertaking this work is to better understand how to prevent foster youth from transitioning to homelessness. We've identified a number of areas that can positively impact youth transitions and a target population that is a strong starting point for creating positive change for at-risk youth.
There is a case plan designation for youth in the child welfare system for whom there is no goal for placement with a legal, permanent family. Labeled APPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement), this case plan is deemed acceptable only if there are no other possible legal, permanent family goals. In Multnomah County, there are currently 400 youth who have an APPLA case plan. While some youth with an APPLA plan have a stable living arrangement, youth with an APPLA case plan are among the most at-risk for homelessness following transition from care.

Potential action steps we have identified are listed below. Potential changes cross a variety of sectors, and range from policy to practice. Our hope is to bring the community together to create an action agenda to begin making changes that will help prevent homelessness after transition from foster care.

1. **Support initiatives to keep youth safely at home**—This practice should increase family stability and decrease the number of youth in foster care, which should also reduce the number of youth who transition to adulthood from the child welfare system.

2. **Ensure continued action to reduce disproportionality in the child welfare system**—Overrepresentation of youth of color in the child welfare system is an ongoing crisis in the system and we need both political and public will to fully undertake the systemic changes needed to end disproportional representation.

3. **Build social capital for adolescents**—One of the greatest deficits faced by youth transitioning from care is the likelihood that they have weak or non-existent ties to family, friends and supportive community members. This lack of network—or social capital—not only limits opportunity, it dramatically increases the risk that a relatively benign incident can become the catalyst for homelessness.

4. **Incorporate youth voice into transition planning**—Current policy and practice call for youth voice to be actively incorporated into the transition planning process. It’s important to create opportunities for youth in care to provide self-direction and build the “power of voice” long before it’s time to begin planning for a transition to independent living.

5. **Increase access to skill building for independent living**—ILP in Oregon needs to be funded to ensure universal access. Additionally, the overarching program may need evaluation to ensure that the services that are provided are actually meeting the need.

6. **Create opportunities to access education**—Youth in foster care face many barriers to completing high school, and ensuring that every youth in foster care earns a high school diploma or GED should remain a high priority. While there are resources for foster youth who are seeking higher education (including Chafee grants and the Oregon tuition waiver), most still need additional supports in order to be successful in community colleges and universities.
7. Create opportunities to access training and employment–In addition to lower educational attainment, foster youth may not have been consistently exposed to the expectations of employers. They may require access to job training in order to increase their employability, as well as opportunities to access workplaces.

8. Improve availability of housing–Lack of access to affordable housing is a key factor in youth becoming homeless. There is a need for a stabilized supply of appropriate housing for transitional age youth as they transition to independent living.

9. Increase system integration–In Oregon, there is strong integration between the court system and DHS. A significant number of youth cross over between the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. While system integration efforts are underway, increased collaboration between the systems can only serve to improve outcomes.

10. Improve adolescent placements–Adolescence is a challenging time for parents, and seems to be particularly so for foster parents. While many trainings and other tools are available for foster parents, the challenges of finding and retaining foster parents who excel at parenting teenagers remains high.

11. Deepen the “safety net” for young adults leaving care–When Oregon created the option for youth to stay in care until the age of 21, it significantly expanded the safety net for transition aged youth. At the same time, many youth who reach the age of 18 while in care do not have the patience to remain in the custody of the state. We need to create structures and systems that nurture youth through this transitional phase, without the need for them to stay in the child welfare system.
I. INTRODUCTION
Youth homelessness is a silent epidemic, invisible to many. Because of the nature of the problem, homelessness can be difficult to measure. In Oregon, no single data source tracks youth homelessness. The Oregon Runaway and Homeless workgroup estimates 24,000 unaccompanied youth experience homelessness with approximately 1,500 to 2,000 homeless youth in Multnomah County on any given day.

In Multnomah County, the Homeless Youth Continuum (comprised of four agencies) provides a coordinated system of services and supports for youth ages 15 to 23. This system is, by definition, a late-stage intervention and can only serve about 1,000 youth each year. Research indicates that without access to services, homeless youth are more likely to experience sexual victimization, abuse, suicide, poor physical health, substance abuse, gang involvement, chronic homelessness as an adult, and early death. Any activity that can move “upstream” by preventing youth homelessness can also prevent these negative outcomes.

The link between youth homelessness and foster care
Youth become homeless for a variety of reasons, including family problems (conflict or abuse at home); economic problems, including a whole family becoming homeless and then separated; and a history of foster care.

Every year approximately 20,000 youth “age out” of the foster care system in the United States and are expected to live independently. In many states this occurs at age 18, regardless of the youth’s ability to successfully transition to independent living. Putting aside that the majority of youth who reside with their family of origin are not expected to become instantly self-supporting upon reaching the age of majority foster youth are often notably underprepared for the task of living independently. Due to circumstances mostly beyond their control, they are less likely to have completed basic education and/or skill training, more likely to experience physical and mental health issues, and unlikely to have a safe place to turn for help. For many of those youth, life on the streets is a short walk from foster care.

Homelessness, in fact, is an all too common outcome for foster youth. A variety of studies have placed the number of former foster youth becoming homeless at anywhere from 20 to 65 percent. A recent study in California concluded that 65 percent of emancipating youth in the state lacked safe and affordable housing (a definition of homelessness used under federal law). Once they become homeless, youth become more vulnerable due to limited health care, addiction and mental illness.

Oregon has one of the highest rates of placement in foster care in the country, and Multnomah County has a foster care rate almost three times the national average. While Oregon has far too many youth in foster care, the experience of youth
transitioning from foster care in Oregon is not significantly different than the national experience. Youth remaining in foster care in this state until they reach emancipation experience some advantages, such as the ability to remain in the system until the age of 21 and health insurance coverage from the Oregon Health Plan; however, youth leaving care in Oregon each year face a challenging road. In 2010, approximately 40 percent of youth entering the Homeless Youth Continuum in Multnomah County indicated that they had been in foster care.

New Avenues for Youth is a direct service provider for youth who are homeless and at risk for homelessness. In its most recent strategic planning process, New Avenues committed to increasingly invest its resources in prevention-focused advocacy. In that capacity, it received a grant from the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund of the Northwest Health Foundation to better understand why youth become homeless and study current child welfare reform efforts in order to plot the most strategic course for informing and influencing policy and practice related to supporting youth in foster care in making successful transitions to adulthood.
II. METHODOLOGY
Our approach to informing this project is to assume good intent on the part of all the actors in the child welfare system. Too often, change efforts demonize individuals and organizations that are working on the front lines of direct service. Providing direct service to individuals and families in crisis is mentally and physically taxing work. We assume that the people and agencies that compose the child welfare system are fundamentally committed to ensuring the safety and health of the young people entrusted to their care. While we may find philosophical differences in how work is conducted and how limited resources are invested, our goal is to promote positive systemic change, not to attack or criticize.

Our approach to information gathering for this effort included:
• Reviewing existing literature on the child welfare system, with a specific focus on transition aged youth
• Reviewing current Oregon policies and practices related to transition aged youth in the child welfare system
• Engaging more than 40 child welfare professionals and community members through in-depth interviews
• Engaging youth who have transitioned from the foster care system in Oregon

In using this approach, we attempted to gather comprehensive information while respecting the limitations of our resources. In the findings section that follows, we have synthesized what we believe to be the most relevant research related to what happens to youth as they emancipate from the system and, to the degree that this data exists, why that happens.

At New Avenues, we have begun the work of operationalizing our strategic plan to become better advocates for these youth before they experience homelessness. We hope this stimulates a more robust community conversation about the needs of youth in transition.
III. POLICY AND PRACTICE

In reviewing the structure of the child welfare system, both federal and in Oregon, we seek to set the stage for further understanding of how to impact both policy and practice.

A. Overview of Oregon child welfare system

In Oregon, child welfare is managed by the Department of Human Services (DHS) Children, Adults and Families division in close collaboration with the county courts. The court system uses a “single judge” system, which ensures that a young person has consistency and oversight in their case.

In the past, Oregon has placed children into foster care at an above-national rate, an approach that the state is now attempting to remedy (see Safe and Equitable Foster Care Reduction below). As part of that shift, DHS has identified a number of factors that guide its current thinking and guiding philosophy. At the highest level, these include:

• Finding ways to keep youth safely at home
• Incorporating cultural considerations at the outset and throughout a family’s involvement with the system
• Expanding its view of “family”
• Working in partnership with families
• Increasing access to in-home services and a more comprehensive service array

1. Permanency philosophy

Oregon law requires DHS to seek permanent placements. There are four accepted forms of permanency: Family reunification, adoption, guardianship and “APPLA” (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement). Permanency means different things for different people, but at its core, it represents knowing where—and to whom—one belongs. Youth often talk about it from a very practical perspective, defining it as knowing where you’ll be going for Thanksgiving or whom you can call when you hit a bump in the road.

Of the four “permanency” options, family reunification is the preferred option for most children and it includes being returned to extended family (not just birth parents). Adoption, while creating a permanent family, is often not a desirable option for older youth who do not wish to have their family ties severed. Guardianship, which does not terminate parental rights, is often a desirable outcome for adolescents in foster care. APPLA case plans, sometimes also called permanent foster care, are technically the plan of last resort because they don't represent true permanency; however, they are all too common, particularly among youth over the age of 14.
In Multnomah County, there are currently more than 400 youth with an APPLA case plan. They are disproportionately youth of color, and are weighted toward older youth. Nearly one-third of youth in Multnomah County with an APPLA plan are 18 to 21 years old. Because it is the least preferred option, there are a number of safeguards in place to prevent children from being assigned APPLA plans, as well as to transition them to more permanent options when available. Despite these safeguards, and despite the decline in number of youth entering APPLA plans, many youth in Oregon have a permanency plan that isn’t permanent.

2. Transition planning
There is a strong supportive policy structure. Oregon law requires that transition planning begin at age 14 for youth with an APPLA plan, or at 16 for other youth in substitute care. Certain transitions services are also available to youth who were previously in care. Between the ages of 14 to 16, youth and their caseworkers are guided by the Transition Plan 1 (T1). After 16, youth move to a level two transition plan (T2). Transition plans are designed to create structure around planning for education, employment, housing, health (mental and physical), and community connections and supportive relationships.

Oregon provides Independent Living Program (ILP) services for current foster youth between the ages of 14 and 20. Former foster youth may be able to receive services between the ages of 16 and 20; or up to age 23 for Chafee Education and Training Vouchers. Services are available statewide. Oregon anticipates serving 1,650 youth through contracted ILP services and an additional/unduplicated 125 youth through the Chafee Education and Training Grant (ETG) program, for a total of 1,775 youth in FFY12 (just less than half of those eligible). Youth, and many practitioners, report that the experience of planning for transition is flawed. While the policy seems sound, and was designed in conjunction with youth, the practice often falls short of providing a transition plan led by a youth, fully understood by a youth, and supported by the resources to help implement the plan.

3. Role of the judiciary
Oregon uses a “one family, one judge” system in which a judge stays with a case for as long as it is open. For some youth, this can be years. This creates deep continuity in judicial oversight of a case, and can also mean the development of relationships between judges and the youth for whom they are responsible. This relationship, coupled with HB 808 requirements, seems to have fostered a climate in which judges are deeply reluctant to dismiss cases. While the intention to keep youth in care stems from good intent, in some cases it seems to be a delaying rather than curative tactic.
B. Relevant legislation

There are a number of legislative actions that directly impact the child welfare system and children in the foster care system. Key federal and state acts are summarized here.

- Indian Child Welfare Act (1978) – ICWA provides protections for Native American children in the child welfare system. It was implemented in response to the exceptionally high removal rate of Native children from their homes. ICWA sets the minimal Federal standards for nearly all Indian child custody proceedings, including adoption, voluntary and involuntary termination of parental rights, and removal and foster care placement of Indian children. It grants tribes’ exclusive disposition jurisdiction over Native American children living on tribal lands, and concurrent jurisdiction over others.
- Independent Living Initiative (1986) – First federal legislation that focused on the needs of youth transitioning from care.
- Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) – Marked a shift toward putting children’s health and welfare above goals for reunification with families of origin, while supporting the right for youth to have a permanency plan.
- Foster Care Independence Act (Chafee, 1999) - Ensures that youth involved in the foster care system receive services and support that enable them to successfully transition to independent living. The Act was updated in 2002 to include an Education and Training Vouchers Program.
- Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008) – Promotes permanency through relative adoptions and guardianships, increases emphasis on sibling placement, and extends federal support for youth in care through age 21.
- Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act (2011)—Primarily structural, it means that states will be better able to invest in initiatives that help improve child safety and family stability as well as move children from foster care into safe permanent homes.

In Oregon, there are a few pieces of legislation that have direct impact on foster youth.

- Oregon SB 808 (2003) - Requires all caseworkers to begin planning for transition to independent living by the time a youth is 16 years of age.
- Oregon SB 1034 (2005) – Creates the ability for youth to stay in care until age 21; requires that DHS has conducted transition planning with the youth; requires that the youth has safe and stable housing.
- Oregon HB 3075 (2005) – Creates educational stability for foster youth by ensuring that they can remain in their “resident” school district, even if their placement changes.
• Oregon HB 3471 (2011) – Grants tuition waivers in the Oregon University System for youth who age out of foster care, or are adopted after the age of 16.

In addition, Oregon has a Title IV-E Waiver that allows it more flexibility in how it invests federal pass through dollars, which are traditionally restricted for use only while children are in foster care. The state has used some of those funds to provide services that stabilize families so they can keep their children at home, as well as maintaining family stability after children have been returned home.

C. Programs and initiatives
There are a number of programs and initiatives in Oregon and the Portland metro area that are designed to impact foster youth. While this is not intended to be an exhaustive cataloging of youth programs, it does attempt to create an overview of the activities that are currently underway as they relate to transition aged foster youth.

1. Independent Living Program (ILP)
The Independent Living Program (ILP) is a DHS program intended for all transition aged youth. As it is currently funded, however, only 40 percent of Oregon youth eligible for services actually receive them. In order to be eligible, a youth must be between the ages of 14 and 21 and currently in foster care, or have been in care for 180 days after turning 14. ILP services can include educational and vocational support, employment, life skills training and support groups.

The ILP programs in Oregon are funded exclusively with federal Chafee dollars. With limited availability, many county ILP programs have waiting lists—up to two years in some locations. Many community providers expressed concern that those receiving ILP in Oregon are already self-directed and have access to services, and that the 60 percent who are not being served are the most in need of support in transitioning to independent living.

2. Safe and equitable reduction of foster care initiative
In 2009, Oregon DHS initiated the Safe and Equitable Reduction effort in partnerships with the Oregon Commission on Children and Families and Casey Family Programs. The statewide goals to be achieved by 2011 were to:
   • Safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 20 percent
   • Increase relative foster placements by 50 percent
   • Reduce the number of children entering care by 10 percent
   • Increase foster care exits by 20 percent
   • Reduce the disproportionately high representation of Native and African Americans in foster care
• Hold the child abuse and neglect recurrence rate at or below 6.5 percent

The strategy to do this is three-pronged: convene a task force to address disproportionality (see below), find permanent homes for children in the system using a roundtable approach, and create a public awareness campaign to get citizens involved.

3. Governor’s Task Force on Disproportionality in Child Welfare

In 2009 Executive Order 09-02 and Oregon Senate Bill 630 established the Child Welfare Equity Task Force to study the causes and make recommendations on how to eliminate the problem of racial disproportionality in Oregon’s child welfare system to the Oregon legislature and the Department of Human Services.

The Task Force was composed of members drawn from state legislators, law enforcement and the judicial system, foster parents, community based organizations and the faith community, and academia. Staff support was provided by DHS, Portland State University, University of Washington, and by each of Oregon’s recognized tribes. In May 2011, it presented its finding and recommendations in a report to the Oregon Legislature.

The task force confirmed that in Oregon:

• American Indian/Alaska Native families were nearly twice as likely and African American families were more than twice as likely to be represented in reports to Child Protective Services (compared with their presence in the general population).
• In “founded” cases on abuse, American Indian/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander and African American children were removed from their parents at higher rates than white children (ranging from twice to five times as likely).
• Children of color, especially American Indian/Alaska Native children, are in foster care at higher rates than other children.
• Once in foster care, children of color stay in care longer than white children.

The Task Force suggests that in Oregon, disproportionality stems from three primary causes:

• Structural inequities inside the juvenile dependency system (policy and practice, budget and staffing deficits, and culturally biased decision making).
• External disparities outside of the child welfare system that are more likely to cause a family to encounter the system (poverty, access to health care, etc.).
• Lack of a diverse work force, training and accountability for existing policies and mandates designed to improve the cultural responsiveness of the current system.

Finally, the Task Force outlined recommendations in six key areas: policy, data-based decision making, community capacity, DHS workforce development, legislation and accountability. The recommendations are broad and far-reaching, ranging from a shift from intervention to prevention in child welfare models to building deep relationships with cultural communities. What is less clear, however, is where the resources and leadership to fully implement these comprehensive recommendations will originate.

4. **Multnomah County Child Welfare Workgroup – safe and equitable reduction of foster care**

In 2010, the Multnomah Commission on Children, Families and Community convened a workgroup to explore better collaboration between the county and DHS to meet the goals of safe and equitable reduction of foster care. The workgroup made seven recommendations:

- Continue support to promote racial equity and empowerment
- Develop of a legislative agenda for preventative services for at risk families
- Create systems for county departments to track families with child welfare (where appropriate)
- Replicate the 30 families in 30 days model to align county and state resources (the program removed typical barriers in order to move 30 families out of shelters and into housing in 30 days)
- Create a DHS/county workgroup to continue exploring partnership and coordination
- Establish a task force to decrease family members who are excluded as potential placements because of past criminal records
- Continue support for efforts to prevent victimization of children and support those who have been victimized through Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) program

5. **Crossover youth practice model**

Crossover youth are those who have simultaneous involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The Crossover Youth Practice Model, developed by Casey Family Programs and the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University, is being piloted in 12 counties nationally, including Multnomah. The overarching goal of the model is to reduce the number of youth who become involved in both systems.
6. **Family Unification Project**

In 2011, HomeForward (the housing authority of Portland) received a grant to support Section 8 housing waivers for families involved with the child welfare system. The Family Unification Program (FUP) provides ongoing Section 8 waivers for families for whom safe and affordable housing is a barrier to having children returned from state custody. In addition, a small percentage of the waivers have been set aside as transitional housing waivers for youth who are transitioning out of the foster care system. Though the waivers are limited to 18 months, they represent a new and needed resource in helping youth secure housing as they transition to independent living.

7. **Oregon Subsidized Guardianship project (Waiver II)**

From 2004 to 2009, the State of Oregon conducted a Title IV-E waiver demonstration project. A component of Oregon’s federal waiver provides financial support for a program to provide subsidies to caregivers who become permanent legal guardians for foster youth. The Subsidized Guardianship (SG) program was first established in 2000 under Waiver I. At that time, DHS estimated that approximately 60 children would benefit from the program over a two-year period. In fact, 133 youth found permanency in subsidized guardianships. Steady growth of the program followed.

Not surprisingly, the evaluation discovered that the subsided guardianship is a “valuable and unique permanency option” with benefits for youth, families of origin and guardians. In particular, SG represents an especially important option for Native American and African American families for whom kinship care and maintenance on cultural communities is significant. Additionally, it is an appealing option for teens who are seeking permanency but are unwilling to go through with a formal adoption.

In practice, the evaluation determined that, despite their popularity and growth, subsidized guardianships were being underutilized as a permanency option. The reasons for this are complex; however, in the evaluation, 50 percent of cases ruled ineligible for SG were because adoption had not been ruled out.

Caregivers who chose guardianships indicated that one of their reasons for doing so was to provide stability and permanence for the youth. At the same time, they also indicated that a guardianship represented an opportunity for a youth to rejoin their birth family at a later date, seemingly indicating that the caregivers didn’t view the guardianship as a “permanent” permanency option.
D. Regional research studies and interventions

There are a number of research studies currently active that are developing and testing potential intervention models for foster youth in Oregon. With the number of studies that are currently active in the metropolitan area, it is likely that every foster youth in Multnomah County is either in a study or control group.

1. Better Futures

Better Futures is a randomized control study focused on learning the best ways to help youth in foster care who have experienced mental health challenges prepare and plan for college. Youth in foster care with mental health issues face many barriers to participating in higher education. The Better Futures project is learning about effective ways to help these young people prepare for, plan for and enroll in college or vocational training using supported education in mental health and strategies for promoting self-determination. Youth participating in the intervention receive individualized coaching, peer support and connection to foster care alumni and community resources.

2. My Life

Two related studies, collectively referred to as My Life, tests the effects of increasing the self-determination of youth in foster care. Over five years, the studies will involve about 350 current foster youth a four-county area. Youth in the study group will learn to apply skills including problem solving, tracking accomplishments, and building connections with adult allies to achieve their goals. About 40 percent of youth in foster care receive special education services. These are the first studies ever funded to actually test whether providing youth in foster care with empowerment experiences will help them to successfully transition from high school into adult life. The research team received these large grants after they conducted a pilot study showing the intervention was promising in helping youth to be more successful. Study participants will be followed for two years, with the goal being to determine what effects the intervention has on their employment, educational success, independent living, health, and quality of life.

3. FosterClub All-Stars

The FosterClub All-Stars Leadership Academy is a partnership between PSU’s School of Social Work (Regional Research Institute for Human Services/The Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services) and FosterClub, the national network for young people in foster care. The All-Star Summer Internship Program was founded on the belief that young people who have successfully transitioned from foster care to responsible young adulthood are best suited to impact the transition of their younger peers. Over the years, FosterClub has been providing a way for young leaders to reach out to other youth through Teen Conferences. Every summer, 10 to 15 young people who spent their formative years in foster care are chosen as
FosterClub All-Stars. They are provided with intensive leadership and public speaking training, and then dispatched in teams to Teen Conferences and foster care-related events across the country. In addition to participating in dozens of youth events across the country over the summer, the FosterClub All-Stars advocate for system improvement and promote public awareness nationally throughout the year.
IV. LITERATURE REVIEW
The focus of the literature review was to understand major factors that impact child development leading into adolescence, understand the literature and data related to youth transition, and review any promising models or approaches to improving transition outcomes.

In the literature review section, we focused on distilling data about the experience of youth in foster care and outcomes following emancipation, as well as a high-level overview of research and data that might help explain some of those outcomes (such as the impact of trauma on development).

Transition to adulthood

In contrast to the retirement age, which has been steadily declining, the transition to adulthood (at least as measured by economic independence) has been occurring at a later age for nearly three decades. Primarily due to economic forces, which promote a longer investment in higher education and/or inability to find living wage jobs, the period of transition to economic independence now stretches into the mid-20s for young adults from all backgrounds. While age of economic independence can be easier to measure, research shows that young adults who transition to independent living also receive family support in the form of social capital, financial support, and knowledge and guidance. In order to successfully transition, young people are becoming more and more reliant upon parental and family support to make the transition (Foster, Flanagan, Osgood, and Ruth, 375-... in On your own without a net).

For youth who spend their adolescence in foster care, they are often unable to access their families in the same way and for the same supports. Thus, while all youth are facing more challenging transitions, youth in care are among the most challenged. Young people “aging out” of foster care do so with fewer financial and emotional supports than most young people who transition out of a parental home. Compare to mainstream youth, youth leaving foster care are expected to do it almost overnight. Depending upon circumstances, youth in Oregon will usually leave the child welfare system at age 18, but sometimes at 21. They will often do so with few supportive relationships, little money, and even less understanding of what it means to be independent and how to achieve this status.

Foster care experience

Overview of foster care
In the United States, more than 400,000 children reside in foster care each year. Nationally, nearly 25 percent of children in foster care are in relative placements, almost 50 percent were in non-relative foster homes and 16 percent were in group or institutional settings. Just more than 50 percent of children left care because they were united with their families and just more than 50 percent had been in care for
less than one year. Through 2009, child welfare trends indicated that more children were leaving care than entering. Data from the last two years suggests a reversal of that trend, likely in large part to family stress created during the economic downturn.

Oregon currently places children in foster care at a higher rate than any other state. The national rate of children in an out of home placement is 6.3 per 1,000, in Oregon it was 10.1 per 1,000 in 2008 and 9.7 per 1,000 in 2009. According to the Oregon DHS 2010 Child Welfare Data Book:

- 13,129 children spent at least one day in care
- 6,046 children were in family foster care, with almost 33 percent placed with a relative
- 547 children were in either professional shelter programs or a residential treatment setting on an average daily basis
- Of children served in care:
  - 64 percent were Caucasian
  - 14 percent were Hispanic
  - 8 percent were African American
  - 7 percent were Native American
  - 1.5 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander
  - 5 percent did not have a race recorded
- 63 percent of children leaving foster care were reunited with their families.
- 781 children had their adoptions finalized, with 75 percent adopted by relatives or non-relative foster parents
- 201 children exited foster care to a guardianship

Leaving foster care
The most desired outcome for any youth who has entered the child welfare system is the ability for them to return safely to their home. In cases where that is not an option, the priority becomes to find a different permanent living arrangement.

In addition to a high level of placement, foster care in Oregon stay in care to long and “permanent foster care” was the primary long-term plan for many children

Disproportionality and overrepresentation
The over representation of children of color in the child welfare system has been of note and concern for decades. Across the country and in every element of the child welfare system, children of color are present in the system in numbers that exceed their relative proportion in the general population. The issue of disproportionality is multivariate—it includes social, economic, cultural and institutional factors—which increases the complication of reversing this trend. It cannot be ignored, however, that racism (institutional and interpersonal) plays an historic and ongoing role. While various system efforts have been undertaken at all levels, it remains a concerning area that requires marked attention.
Casey Family Programs is a key convener in both national and local conversations about disproportionality. Its research demonstrates that:

- In 2003, 64 percent of the children in foster care were children of color although they constituted only 36 percent of the U.S. child population under 18 years of age. During this same year, African American children accounted for approximately 38 percent of the total number of children placed in foster care while constituting only 15 percent of the total U.S. child population under 18 years of age.

- American Indian children represented 3 percent of children in out-of-home care while constituting 1 percent of the child population. In states where there are large numbers of American Indian children, they may represent between 15 to 65 percent of children in the child welfare system. These percentage rates may be underestimates, as they do not include the number of children in tribal child welfare systems. Data that are aggregated on a national level often mask the overrepresentation of Hispanic/Latino children who have been found to be overrepresented in foster care in states and cities with large Hispanic populations.

**Foster care outcomes for youth transitioning from substitute care**

There are two major studies that have studied young adults aging out of foster care and transitioning into adulthood:

- 2010 Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (conducted by Mark Courtney et al at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago)

- 2006 Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (conducted by Peter Pecora et al at University of Washington)

The Northwest Alumni Study examined outcomes for 659 foster care alumni who were placed in family foster care as children at one private agency, Casey Family Programs, and at state agencies in Oregon and Washington. The research examined case files for children who were placed over a 10-year time period. The Midwest Study looked at 763 youth in three Midwestern states (Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin) who were still in foster care at age 17 and had entered care before age 16 (for a cause other than delinquency). Its goal was to provide an analysis of outcomes for foster care youth transitioning to adulthood subsequent to the passage of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Together the reports provide the most comprehensive look available to outcomes for young people existing foster care. Unfortunately, they paint a relatively bleak picture.

**Preparation for independent living**

The Midwest study found that only 25 percent of foster care alumni reported that they felt very prepared to be self-sufficient when they exited foster care, while 20 percent reported feeling not at all prepared.
Physical and mental health
The majority of youth enter foster care as the result of challenges (abuse and substance abuse being two leading causes) in their birth family. As a result, they may be predisposed to experience mental health issues at higher rates than the general population. In the Casey study more than half of foster care alumni had current mental health issues, compared to about 25 percent in the general population. Strikingly, American war veterans have lower rates of PTSD than former foster children. The Midwest Study indicated that former foster youth, in comparison to peers, were most likely to have received psychotropic medication while being the least likely to have received treatment for substance abuse.

The Midwest Study also examined physical health. The majority of participants reported that they were in good to excellent health. However, they were much more likely than peers in the general population to describe their health as fair or poor, and to report a disability. Participants were less likely than their peers to have health insurance; those with coverage had a much higher likelihood of being covered by Medicaid or another public program.

Young women in the study group were significantly more likely to report not only pregnancy, but also multiple pregnancies. While most indicated that they received prenatal care, the majority also reported that their pregnancies were unplanned. More than 60 percent of males in the Midwest Study indicated that they had impregnated a partner (compared to 28 percent of their peers).

Education
Youth in foster care who experience frequent placements often experience education instability as a result. Despite that, the Casey study shows that foster care alumni attain a high school degree at similar rates as non-foster care alumni (approximately 85 percent); however, foster care alumni earn GED certification instead of a high school diploma at a rate that is six times that of the general population. Earning a GED is more beneficial than dropping out, but is associated with lower earning potential than a diploma.

About 40 percent of alumni received some education beyond high school, but only 20 percent complete a degree or certificate. The alumni rate for earning a bachelor’s degree is only two percent, compared to nearly 28 percent in the general population. The Midwest study reported somewhat lower educational acquisition rates than the Casey study (excepting the rate of college diplomas).

Both studies, however, clearly show that the foster care alumni lag behind their peers educationally. The most common reasons cited for leaving educational programs was lack of money for school. Following that were needing to work full-time (among men) or needing to care for children (among women).
Employment and finances
In the Casey study, the employment rate among foster care alumni was 80 percent, compared to 95 percent (at that time) employment among 20 to 34 year olds. By contrast, the Midwest showed an unemployment level among alumni of just under 50 percent (compared with 75 percent in the control study). Among those reporting earned income in the previous year, their median earnings were $8,000, compared to $18,000 in the control group.

In the Casey study, about one-third of alumni were living in households that were at or below the poverty line, three times the national poverty rate. The Midwest study examined economic hardships (not enough money for rent or basic utilities, eviction) and found that almost half of young adults in the cohort had experienced at least one of the five material hardships.

Homelessness
Measured rates of homelessness vary between 20 to 50 percent post-foster care, with many differences attributable to changes in the study criteria and measurement duration. The Casey study indicated than more than one in five foster care alumni experienced at least one day of homelessness within one year of leaving foster care.

Theoretical foundations
Youth development

1. Positive Youth Development
Positive Youth Development is a strengths-based approach developed more than 30 years ago by the Department of Health and Human Services that assists young people in promoting a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and power. In short, a positive youth development strategy highlights a young person’s strengths and assets rather than their deficits. While the approach is appropriate for all youth, the strategy is often focused on vulnerable youth populations, including young people in foster care. The positive youth development approach is, in part, a response to earlier attempts to “fix problems” by focusing on a specific negative outcome. In more recent years, a growing belief from both practitioners and researchers emphasizes prevention, and more specifically, a holistic approach to prevention. Positive Youth Development strategies incorporate strengths-based approaches, resilience frameworks, self-determination, and inclusion of youth voice.

2. Impact of trauma on development
The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (Anda and Felitti) demonstrates that a greater number of early adverse experiences leads to increased likelihood of developing physical and emotional illness. In fact, early childhood experiences are a prime determinant of adult health later in life. Foster children will have
experienced traumatic experiences leading up to, and including, their placement into care and may continue to experience traumatizing events while in care. Additionally, children in care experience many forms of loss (of caregivers, friends, etc.) without the opportunity to appropriately grieve, which can lead to further mental distress.

3. Mentoring
Mentoring programs are a popular response to the public’s concern for vulnerable youth. Over the last several decades, the number of mentor programs has grown at an incredibly rapid rate. The reason for the proliferation of such programs is in part because there is evidence demonstrating their effectiveness. Additionally, policymakers and funders believe these programs to be relatively low-cost, as most are staffed with volunteer mentors. The research also continually reaffirms that one of the most important and valuable assets to a young person is a strong relationship with a trusted adult. Finally, and quite significantly when it comes to policymaking, the mentoring model is one that has face validity, or makes sense, to the general public.

A 2002 meta-analysis of mentoring programs (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper) assessed effects of youth mentoring programs and explored factors that impact program effectiveness. They found that research supports the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs and that positive effects translate across youth demographics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and family structure. The authors do caution that the overall impact of mentoring may not measure up to the overwhelming public support of these programs—that is, the results are positive but modest.

It is also important to note a potential pitfall of mentoring: mentoring relationships that don’t work out (for any number of reasons). Research indicates that mentoring relationships that terminate within the first 3 months are linked to decreased perceptions of self-worth and educational achievement among youth.

4. Social capital
The concept of social capital as it applies to youth in care has been gaining traction over the last several years. In this context, social capital refers to the network of social relationships that support healthy development and living. Social capital is valuable throughout a lifetime, but is critically important as a young person transitions to independent living.

Social capital is intertwined with the concept of permanency in the child welfare system. The concept of permanency is a core driver in the current child welfare system. At its core, permanency is based on values related to the role of family of origin and research that shows that children thrive in healthy, stable homes. However, with its focus on “family” as a pathway to permanent connections, the permanency culture has sometimes overlooked other positive relationships in a
young person’s life. Social capital thinking is intended to broaden permanency thinking and approaches.

One researcher defined social capital as the value that is created by investing in relationships with others through processes of trust and reciprocity (Coleman, 1990). The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which serves youth who are leaving foster care, defines four sources of social capital: family, school, neighborhood/community, and peers. The very act of entering foster care can begin to break down the social bonds (and social capital) that a youth has developed, and frequent movements and isolation can severely limit the social capital of foster youth.

The impacts, particularly on youth in transition, are real and lasting. Many of the strategies currently underway in child welfare—improving family placements, limiting school changes, increases in mentoring problems—will impact the social capital networks of young people in care. However, there is still a need to ensure that transition aged youth who don't have existing access to social capital are given opportunities to build those networks before and during their period of transition from the child welfare system.
V. COMMUNITY-BASED FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In addition to the literature review, we conducted extensive outreach to government agencies, nonprofit service providers and advocates, and the private sector to garner a comprehensive understanding of the current state of foster care in Oregon, with a special eye toward youth who will remain in care until they transition to independent living.

These community conversations highlighted changes occurring in the child welfare system, uncovered gaps, and revealed areas for future work.

A. Keep kids safely at home

Keeping kids safely at home is a high priority among all facets of the child welfare system. Research, and experience, consistently demonstrate that the act of removing a child from their home causes trauma. Keeping children safely in their homes, however, requires a commitment to supporting families in crisis. And, more broadly, it suggests a move toward a prevention focus. And, while those working in the field have long advocated for prevention and early intervention, in our culture it is more common to fund late-stage intervention than to invest in prevention.

Over the last several years in Oregon, DHS has moved toward keeping more kids in their homes and/or returning as soon as it is safe. While it may be inconsistent in practice as of yet, many workers who deal with adolescents note the need to carefully consider the differences between what is safe for a younger child versus that which is acceptable for an adolescent.

B. Build/maintain permanent connections

People who work directly with young people before and through transition to independent living have long understood that permanent connections are a key marker for successful outcomes. Creating and helping to maintain those connections for young people who will not transition from foster care to a family home has proved difficult in practice. In fact, while creating permanent connections is well supported in the literature, it is reported to be much more limited in practice in Oregon.

Humans are social creatures, and our traditional social structure supports interdependence. Youth who have experienced foster care, particularly "permanent" foster care, have experienced events that by definition have broken down their relationships with families of origin. While some may be able to repair their relationships and/or forge new ones within their extended families, the generational poverty and violence that impacts so many families involved with the child welfare system presents a significant barrier to healthy relationships. At the same time, other connections that serve as both substitutes and additions to family supports (teachers, coaches, family friends, health care providers, faith leaders, etc.) have often been disrupted by frequent placements and other structural barriers.
Oregon DHS requires activities that create and support permanent connections for adolescent foster care youth. Many interviewees suggest, however, that the practice is extremely limited in the metro area. Some state that caseworkers carry inherent biases against families of origin, even extended families. Others note that workers carry large caseloads and that the extensive work involved in finding far-flung family members, and then facilitating relationship building, is simply not a reasonable expectation given the myriad other demands.

Several years ago, DHS sponsored a training using the Family Find model. While the intention was good, it appears that use of this model and approach has fallen by the wayside. This is consistent with Family Find’s own research, which suggests that it requires a consistent and supported community approach to maintain this model.

In Jackson County, Oregon, the local CASA affiliate is piloting a five-year program with an investment from its Commission on Children and Families. Its primary goal is to ensure that youth transitioning from foster care have a social anchoring system using the Family Find model. In addition to finding family members, the caseworker invests in helping the youth and family member(s) build real relationships. While the program is successful, they note that it is an extremely intensive process—a .5FTE caseworker is able to “connect” approximately 20 teens per year. The organization notes that, from its perspective, the family reconnection process is best completed by a caseworker not associated with DHS, as many families (and caseworkers) have “baggage” that prevent successful relationship building.

C. Skills acquisition
Ensuring that youth acquire the skills necessary to succeed in life was a consistent theme among community interviews. Participants noted the need both to ensure educational attainment and employability. From an education perspective, many noted the focus on helping youth transition to higher education. While all noted the importance of advanced education as a key tool to escape from poverty, many also observed two additional points: the need to first get youth successfully through secondary education, and that post-secondary is not an option for all youth, creating the need to ensure that they have the skills to obtain gainful employment. Participants also noted that higher education is not the appropriate path for many youth leaving foster care and called equally for access to training and employment.

In all conversations there was a consistent call for expansion and better utilization of ILP services across the state. There is agreement that all foster youth in Oregon deserve to have access to Independent Living Services, and that funding ILP at a level that ensures all youth has access is a critical priority.
D. Youth voice
Across the spectrum of interviews, participants indicated the need to listen to youth voice, as well as create opportunities to cultivate it. Many noted, often ruefully, that it is easier to talk about really listening and engaging youth than it is to practice. Observation of this gap between intent and practice, even in well-meaning adult practitioners, seems significant and an area for potential future exploration.

Additionally, multiple people noted that it’s not enough to be listening for youth voice, there is also a tremendous need to cultivate it, particularly for foster youth who will likely transition to independence from the child welfare system. Development of voice, like any skill, takes practice and foster youth often have precious little opportunity to do so. Youth who may have experienced a lifetime of not being heard are not going to find their voice naturally. If they are unprepared to speak on their own behalf, key opportunities—such as the development of transition plans—may be significantly underutilized and/or not be representative of a youth’s goals.

E. System integration and improvement
Although not called for by all participants, those who are particularly familiar with the barriers that the system creates for youth called for continued system integration and improvement. In particular, many noted the chasms that exist between DHS and OYA. While most participants understand the complex nature of those divides, they note that if the goal is to improve the youth experiences and foster success, we need to tackle this issue. For example, one participant shared that the lack of alignment between DHS and OYA foster systems means that a youth in a successful OYA foster placement will be forced to leave their stable placement if they are discharged from OYA custody.

F. Meeting specialized needs of adolescents
Many participants pointed out the specialized needs of adolescents in foster care. These special needs encompassed both the unique parenting requirements that adolescence demands as well as the need to prepare youth for what is often an abrupt transition to independent living. Recruiting and training foster parents is challenging, and even more so for adolescent placements.

G. Conversations with youth
Youth were incorporated into the community listening phase, and their input is folded into the overall community findings section (above). Outreach included in-depth interviews with former foster youth and group listening sessions with youth who have transitioned from care with varying degrees of “success.”

Key points these various groups wanted to communicate that may not be explicit in the previous section include:
• **Permanency**—Youth note that foster care is, by definition, an impermanent state of being and they have become both immune to and embittered by the
concept that it might be. In particular, those who have experienced failed adoptions or family placements are particularly skeptical of the concept. They desire a more realistic use of language, but at the same time they absolutely are looking for a place that offers them permanent sense of belonging in the world.

- **Transition planning**—The subject of transition planning is fraught with tension. Most youth we spoke with indicated that there were significant challenges with their transition planning process. They talk about being unprepared for how the process would work, rushed case workers, an emphasis on forms at the expense of content, missing important documents (such as birth certificates), lack of access to services, and inability to access resources such as ILP. Many youth indicate that they feel like they planned their own transition. There is, however, a perception gap. DHS caseworkers indicate that youth are often unwilling or unprepared to participate in the planning process and may be “choosing” to make their own plan.

- **Viewpoint matters**—While related the finding above, it’s worth noting that youth perceive that transition planning frequently seemed framed from an adult perspective. They perceive that the adults involved in their planning are more concerned about “checking the boxes” or putting them on life paths the adults think are important than truly engaging youth in a conversation about what they want to achieve in life. Again, this is youth perception, and likely doesn’t reflect the intentions of caseworkers.
VI. CONCLUSIONS AND ACTION STEPS
The data is clear: Foster youth who transition from the child welfare system are at risk of becoming homeless. There is no one person, system, program or policy to blame for this issue. Shifts in practice at the Oregon Department of Human Service are intended to keep more kids safe at home, which in turn should decrease the number of youth who eventually transition from the child welfare system to interdependent living. In the meantime, however, there is a generation of youth already in the child welfare system who will likely find themselves still in care when they reach transition age.

As a community, we can do better for these youth. Organizations in many sectors, ranging from child welfare to education, from workforce development to housing, all have a role to play in ensuring that youth who have experienced foster care have the supports, social capital and opportunities to become adults who thrive in an interdependent community.

The challenges faced by youth in care, and those ready to transition from care, are multivariate and the solutions must be equally varied. We have identified a number of potential steps covering the range of policy and practice that can improve the experiences of youth in transition. Some require better coordination among existing providers, others may require changes in policy and/or administrative rules, and still others call for us to be supportive of transformative efforts already underway in Oregon. Our hope is that a broad mix of agencies, community-based organizations and individuals are committed to finding linked strategies that will lead to a reduction in the number of youth who experience homelessness after leaving the child welfare system.

A. Support initiatives to keep youth safely at home
The child welfare system continues to place emphasis on ensuring that young people can live safely within their own homes. Most commonly, this is accomplished by providing in-home supports to families who are experiencing a crisis. This practice should increase family stability, and decrease the number of youth in foster care, which should also reduce the number of youth who transition to adulthood from the child welfare system. At the same time, we encourage continuing to evaluate what constitutes a “safe” home for a young adult. While it is complicated, what is unsafe for a small child is not necessarily unsafe for a young adult, even if it is not preferred.

Note: During the outreach phase of this study, no consistent theme arose related to the need to create urgency in returning children in the system home as soon as quickly as possible. In reviewing this final report, the planning committee observed this omission and asked that it be noted.
B. **Ensure continued action to reduce disproportionality in the child welfare system**

Overrepresentation of youth of color in the child welfare system is an ongoing crisis in the child welfare system. Though Oregon understands this challenge, and has taken steps to address it, there does not yet seem to be political or public will to fully undertake the systemic changes needed to truly put an end to disproportional representation.

C. **Build social capital for adolescents in care**

One of the greatest deficits faced by youth transitioning from care is the likelihood that they have weak or non-existent ties to family, friends and supportive community members. This lack of network—or social capital—not only limits opportunity, it dramatically increases the risk that a relatively benign incident can become a catalyst for homelessness. Social capital is intertwined with the concept of permanency in the child welfare system. At its core, permanency is based on values related to the role of family of origin and research that shows that children thrive in healthy, stable homes. However, with its focus on “family” as a pathway to permanent connections, the permanency culture has sometimes overlooked other positive relationships in a young person’s life. Social capital thinking is intended to broaden permanency thinking and approaches.

D. **Incorporate youth voice into transition planning**

Currently, policy and practice call for youth voice to be actively incorporated into the transition planning process. However, there seem to be processes and structural procedures that interfere with ensuring that the youth is at the center of their own transition planning process. Additionally, even if a youth is encouraged to take charge of their planning, they often don’t have necessary experience to know or assert their desires. As a result, it’s important to create opportunities for youth in care to provide self-direction and build the “power of voice” long before it’s time to begin planning for a transition to independent living.

E. **Increase access to skill building for independent living**

Every youth in Oregon deserves the opportunity to build the skills and relationships that will ensure their ability to transition successfully to independent living. ILP in Oregon needs to be funded to ensure universal access. Additionally, the overarching program may need evaluation to ensure that the services provided are actually meeting the need.

F. **Create opportunities to access education**

As the economy has worsened, youth of all circumstances are turning to higher education to bridge this time of high unemployment. For youth in foster care, there are many barriers to completing high school, and ensuring that every youth in foster care earns a high school diploma or GED should remain a high priority. While there are resources for foster youth who are seeking higher
education (including Chafee grants and the Oregon tuition waiver), most still need additional supports in order to be successful in community colleges and universities.

G. Create opportunities to access training and employment
Access to training and employment is clearly an issue for all transition aged youth; however, transitioning foster youth face additional challenges. In addition to lower educational attainment, they may not have been consistently exposed to the expectations of employers. They may require access to job training in order to increase their employability, as well as opportunities to access workplaces.

H. Improve availability of housing
Lack of access to affordable housing is a key factor in youth becoming homeless. There is a need for a stabilized supply of appropriate housing for transition aged youth as they transition to independent living.

I. Increase system integration
In Oregon, the court system and DHS are strongly integrated. A significant number of youth overlap both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. While system integration efforts are underway, increased collaboration between the systems can only serve to improve outcomes.

J. Improve adolescent placements
Adolescence is a challenging time for parents, and seems to be particularly so for foster parents. While many trainings and other tools are available for foster parents, the challenge of finding and retaining foster parents who excel at parenting teenagers remain high.

K. Deepen the “safety net” for young adults leaving care
When Oregon created the option for youth to stay in care until the age of 21, it significantly expanded the safety net for transition aged youth. At the same time, many youth who reach the age of 18 while in care do not have the patience to remain in the custody of the state. We need to create structures and systems that nurture youth through this transitional phase, without the need for them to stay in the child welfare system.