

KEEPING FOSTER YOUTH OFF THE STREETS

Improving Housing Outcomes for Youth
that Age Out of Care in New York City



FEDERATION OF PROTESTANT WELFARE AGENCIES
JANUARY 2014

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KEEPING YOUTH OFF THE STREETS

Executive Summary

Improving Housing Outcomes for Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care

Out of the 6,712 youths discharged from foster care in New York City in 2011, 13.2% were between 18 and 21 years old and had aged out of care.¹ When these youth age out of care, they are on their own. They do not have a safety net of a family or aftercare services to fall back on when they need help. And this is a population that needs such support.

Within three years as many as 231 youths, who aged out in 2011, are likely to come into a city homeless shelter, according to recent foster youth homeless statistics. Notably, this figure does not include all the youth who are effectively homeless and temporarily staying on the couch of someone they know or are sleeping on the streets.

This report by the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA), *“Keeping Foster Youth Off The Streets: Improving Housing Outcomes for Youth that Age Out of Care in New York City,”* presents an evaluation of the operation of New York City’s child welfare system to ensure youth who have aged out of foster care will reside in stable living situations. The report was written in response to caseworkers at FPWA member agencies who continue to voice their frustrations about how to achieve the best housing outcomes for youth aging out, which indicated the need for systems-level reforms. FPWA drafted this report to show that housing instability for youth who age out remains an on-going, serious problem.

This report provides recommendations that the new mayoral administration could implement to improve housing outcomes for these youth. To our knowledge, this is the only report in recent years that has focused primarily on housing outcomes for youth who age out of care in New York City. To draft the

report, FPWA gathered research, analyzed data and reviewed relevant policies and regulations regarding the operation of the child welfare system for youth aging out of care. FPWA promotes the social and economic well-being of greater New York’s most vulnerable by advocating for just public policies and strengthening human service organizations.

A Heroic Effort to Realize Hopes and Dreams

Amid the many youth aging out of foster care, there are individuals who daily wage heroic struggles to overcome the challenges. Maureen, not her real name, is one of them.

She left the foster care system in New York City in 2013 at 21 years old. Until then Maureen had served as a role model for a small high-risk population with many capabilities that can thrive and save the city money if given the right support.

Hard working and responsible, Maureen works full-time as a cashier on the late night shift at a fast food restaurant on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. She has also been going to college, although she recently took off a semester to save money. Thanks to her foster mother’s caring and supportive home environment, she was able to graduate high school and enroll in college.

She explains: “Like I spent 4 years of my life happy... I had my own room with two beds and it was great. We would go on vacation down south to see her family like, you know, like a normal family would.”

Her foster care caseworker had been dedicated and committed, going above and beyond what was needed, and Maureen had been extremely diligent in following instructions to prepare for the transition out of care.

When she aged out, Maureen left her foster parent and returned to her grandmother, who had origi-

Maureen's story of homelessness is not unique. There are many youths between 18 and 21 years old who are aging out of foster care without achieving support systems to ensure housing stability.

nally abandoned her to foster care. Within months, Maureen's housing stability fell apart. One day, "I come back home (to her grandmother's house), all my stuff is packed," she explains. "So, it's like she did it twice...the only reason why I went to my grandmother was because she felt alone at her house...but when I get there it's just hell. Hell, hell, hell, hell." Her grandmother was unprepared to live with Maureen, "She's like, "oh, don't use my address for nothing". That means I can't get my meds. I can't get social security... After like three months she like, "ohh, pay me \$20 a week for rent"...and then she's scared somebody's going to bust in the door (because she thought Maureen would bring a bad element to house). So what I do?... buy a \$60 pad lock for the house door. Like, it, it was hell..." After being thrown out, she found herself on her own with nowhere to go. She reached out to her former caseworker, who then advised Maureen to go to an emergency homeless shelter.

Connecting Failures at the Practice Level

Maureen's story of homelessness is not unique. There are many youths between 18 and 21 years old who are aging out of foster care without achieving support systems to ensure housing stability. The urgency of this problem is compounded by the fact that while the foster care census continues to decline in New York City, the largest percent of children in foster care are over the age of 12.

Maureen's situation is an example of a crisis that can be tied to the city's shortcomings in providing

adequate housing options and aftercare services. This report focuses on system-wide reforms that can help eradicate this dilemma.

Despite Significant City Effort, Some Youth Age Out with Insufficient Preparations

The city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) aims to prepare foster youth for adulthood and to help them transition into independent living if they are not adopted or reunited with their parents.

State regulations require ACS to develop an Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) for foster youth, and these regulations spell out a series of preparations over time for independence that caseworkers at foster care providers have to do when the youth reaches 14 years old. As a supplement, ACS has also developed its own Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA) Program for provider caseworkers to implement with foster youth by increasing their links to family or adult figures, employment, education, housing, mental health and general health services.

Over the last decade, ACS has launched a number of efforts to strengthen access to housing, improve accountability for housing, and ensure preparations for living independently in housing for youth aging out of care. Importantly, ACS has gained access to the NYCHA database, which enables them to track the progress of applications for housing that they submit on behalf of youth leaving care. Furthermore, ACS created the Housing Support Services (HSS) unit; entered into a partnership with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) in an effort to better service the families and youth aging out of care involved with both agencies; and has also partnered with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) to share data and information and identify resources for young people in youth shelters and other DYCD programs.

Further, ACS has implemented procedures, as a result of a lawsuit settlement, that require agency



It is incredibly challenging to prepare anyone 18 to 21 years old to make it on their own, let alone at-risk youth in New York City.

caseworkers to track foster youth progress prior to discharge through extensive checklists that are monitored by ACS and legal service organizations. ACS has its own housing unit to help youth and caseworkers, and operates an in-house program in partnership with the city's public housing system to teach independent skills for youth prior to transitioning out of care. In addition to the PYA Program, ACS has several programs geared towards obtaining permanency and lasting adult relationships for older youth in care, and it has most recently begun implementing a pilot evidence-based model program—ChildSuccessNYC—that will focus on finding permanency resources for foster youth.

In reviewing these efforts, ACS is clearly concerned with the futures of youth that age out of foster care, and that concern has deepened in recent years as opportunities for housing for young people have proven more challenging.

However, youth that age out today frequently receive ineffective preparations for aging out of care in spite of the detailed state regulations, a well-organized city plan, a complex reporting system for providers, specialized housing services and targeted permanency programs.

One problem is often a large disconnect or difference of opinions between how youth and caseworkers view their relationships and whether they are helpful, solid and reliable. This reflects the difference of perspectives from young people versus frontline workers. The message from youth is sometimes that the workers don't seem to care, or are not sufficiently connected to the youth. However, other youth report very good relationships with their workers.

While some youth take advantage of independent skills training workshops and support services offered by providers, others resist participating, saying the workshops are not useful. Some youth possess a sense of entitlement to receive services that creates a bubble, in which they believe that they are obligated to receive support services whether they choose to take advantage of them or not. Other youth have a lack of trust in providers, which can make them extremely difficult to engage. In most cases, these youth have also endured long periods of trauma and face serious mental health challenges. To deal with these challenges, ACS and providers stress the importance of seeing the potential of youth and helping them to realize a sense of independence.

For the many truly dedicated and committed caseworkers, this situation requires resources, personal attention and time to build relationships in order to engage these at-risk youth. If that worker leaves the agency, it constitutes a setback for the youth. Staff turnover continues to be a constant problem in foster care due to increasing demands and low salaries.

As a result, some of the youth's perceptions of their caseworkers reflect the impact of staff turnover. So, good relationships between youth and caseworkers



are partly a function of time and feelings of support and connection. Conversely, when caseworkers leave their position, the youth are left without those positive supports.

Of course, beyond the youth and caseworker relationship, it is incredibly challenging to prepare anyone 18 to 21 years old to make it on their own, let alone at-risk youth in New York City. Some of the challenges of preparing youth for aging out of care involve the larger issues facing youth in New York City, such as salaries that do not equate to a living wage and high housing costs. While ACS has made efforts to address the overreliance on internships and low-wage work for youth employment, typical salaries for young people and housing costs add to the already overwhelming task that the city and foster care agencies face as they work to prepare youth for living independently.

Furthermore, the challenging part of improving housing stability for youth aging out of care is that ACS and foster care providers seek to catapult these youth to stability that was not often present in their lives before the intervention of the foster care system to protect their safety.

Much of the accountability for providing services is centered on the provider caseworkers, and there is a need for more focus on the foster parents to develop

independent skills. As might be expected from a complex series of changing regulations and initiatives, providers often also find it hard to keep up. Additionally, from ACS' perspective, they believe that it is critical that there is an earlier focus on education and training for foster youth, prior to reaching the critical preparation time from 18 to 21 years old. However, ACS has reduced funding in recent years for its own program for provider services for youth that are preparing to age out, although resourceful providers can still get some of the money back if they provide documentation of services.

More significantly, an issue that compounds youths' housing troubles is the failure to secure permanency and family connections prior to aging out. While ACS has clearly made permanency a priority in policies and services, youth frequently report that they do not have family or adult figures that they can depend on when they age out of care. It is important to recognize the role this plays in helping youth to age out successfully.

City Housing Bureaucracy and Funding Obstacles

When a youth's foster care maintenance payment is cut off at 21 years old, the youth will often have to find a new place to live. A youth will have to leave their foster home or residential setting, unless they have been granted an exception to policy by ACS (which does commonly happen), or they have secured their own apartment (public or supportive housing, or private housing) or been discharged to a family member's home, which they can move in to right away.

For those without a family and in need of a place to live, the city bureaucracy and funding limitations and restrictions regularly create roadblocks in the housing application process for youth and their caseworkers. Caseworkers frequently report a lack of coordination between ACS and the public housing system. In addition, youth often do not get public housing before aging out of foster care. While the city's public housing system recently eased its ban

on former prisoners and will allow some to live in public housing, pregnant and parenting teens have been historically unable to receive public housing if the father of their child has a criminal record, and it is still unclear whether this recent change would allow more housing opportunities for these young women. Supportive housing programs are also unable to accommodate youth who are pregnant or applying with young children.

There's an additional Catch-22 for those foster youth who qualify for housing: the already limited supply of public housing is shrinking and there remains a tiny number of supportive housing units. However, it is understandable that the public housing system and supportive housing providers need to balance the competing needs of the many people seeking affordable housing in New York City. In addition, only a limited number of these at-risk youth will earn enough on their own to rent an apartment with the city's small housing subsidy, which is not sufficient and doesn't nearly meet housing market rates.

While state regulations do not permit a youth from being discharged without stable housing options, permanent living arrangements for youth often prove difficult or temporary. After leaving foster care, too often these youth are isolated and left without resources. If they receive a public housing apartment, youth aging out of care have often described being evicted for not paying rent after losing their job or public assistance, engaging in inappropriate activity or having behavioral problems.

Even those discharged to families frequently slide back into unstable environments with unprepared caregivers and dysfunctional or unstable family members. As a result, they too struggle unsuccessfully to maintain their housing. Often, they end up resorting to staying on the couches of other family or friends. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that before youth are sent back to live with their families, there needs to be some very concrete work done to talk about everyone's expectations and why things

are going to be different from before.

Additionally, it can be observed that the youth usually lack independent living skills, and are under educated, unemployed, and without social supports. The result is that these youth continue to enter the homeless population at unacceptable rates.

No System of Aftercare Services

Except for the availability of short-term trial discharge, youth leaving foster care with no permanent home are provided no real safety net. The city's child welfare system itself does not provide funding or any guidelines for aftercare services.

However, there are currently some foster care agencies that have used private funding to create aftercare services to provide the same services that were offered in care, and there is a need for far more. These aftercare supports can be done in a way that is very specific and does not impact former foster youth in a negative aspect from excessive monitoring. In addition, the city recently changed the process to make it more burdensome for providers to receive discharge grants to help youth achieve greater success in permanent housing, which had paid for their broker's fees, rent, food, furniture, and bedding. These grants were not enough to pay ongoing rent, but they helped youth with the ancillary costs as they transitioned from foster care.

The restoration of discharge grants and more robust aftercare support services would significantly aid the efforts of providers, as they are critical for stabilizing all youth following discharge from care. Of course, the challenge lies in finding the necessary resources to fund these enhancements, but the potential long-term benefits would be significant.

The city has also said it would collect data to track foster youth outcomes after discharge. It is not clear, however, whether the city has set up a system to measure homeless shelter use by former foster youth or the status of its research. There is no clearly

effective system that coordinates city services that youth might rely upon to provide follow-up services. This cannot be completely the assignment of ACS. It must include the whole range of agencies; such as housing, education and employment. This calls for a network that would bring together city government resources from the foster care system, public housing system, public health system, public assistance, public homeless shelters, youth and family programs, public schools and universities, and public workforce system- as well as existing services provided by community-level and grassroots organizations.

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Putting in Perspective the Challenge in New York City

Amid all the challenges, change is possible. Improvements can be made to ensure that these youth age out into secure, safe and stable housing. Why should the city focus now on youth aging out of care, when there are so many young people with problems?

The city cannot be expected to intervene in the lives of all its youth coping with problems, or even half of them. So, how can the city target its scarce resources and overcome the fears of policymakers that New York cannot afford the price tag of compassion?

The answer is to focus on high-risk populations and there is no population at greater risk than foster youth likely to become homeless. Homelessness comes with terrible human and financial costs. Besides the waste of lives, its costs can be calculated in the millions of dollars in terms of crime, prison and re-entry, public assistance, the use of homeless shelters, Medicaid and other social services. Thus, there is a significant social return on investment in reducing homelessness for youth aging out of care that will contribute to economic savings to New York City.

Systems Level Reforms

New York City must do better by these youth and young adults. Too often, former youth in foster care are spending the years after their discharge from care without achieving stable housing and are left homeless. If no effective steps are taken, there will be many more youth entering homelessness in years to come.

Beyond policy changes, it is critical to shift practice and expectations in order to appreciate and realize the potential of each youth in care. While ACS and many providers have created innovative programs to work with youth, the system as a whole has not yet moved sufficiently to work strategically to achieve the best housing outcomes for youth. There is a pressing need for far more system-wide safety nets for aged out youth. Significantly, system changes must not be just to build a housing safety net; they must go towards building a pipeline to success.

Overwhelmingly, youth in foster care have aspirations and do see themselves in the future as successful. They have college plans, "I plan on going to

Kingsboro College next year to become an electrical technician,” and “I want to be a prosecutor... I’m gonna go to college—I think CUNY for criminal justice.” Some are in college, “I’m enrolled in a college already.” Youth in foster care also strive to live independently, be good parents and have families of their own. “I’m hoping to have my business running, have my son with me so that I could be able to take care of my child, take care of my son, but I’ve never had a loving parent, I just want to show him how a parent is supposed to treat their child.”

Finally, youth in foster care are leaders with creativity and enthusiasm to solve problems, “I just thought of an idea. This might cost the city lots of money but being that all the kids (are) in different stages maybe they could give them a plan and give them all different services that are best for them. That’s what I was thinking. More hands on stuff like instead of sitting and learning about what you’re supposed to, I would create a program where a kid could come and stay for 30 days in a little house or apartment and see if he could handle it by himself.”

Opportunity, stability and success during the transition out of foster care for youth set the tone for the rest of a young person’s life. If we can create a pipeline to success rather than a series of obstacles, we can be confident that these young people will respond well. There is hope for change for this vulnerable and high-risk population.

“If we can create a pipeline to success rather than a series of obstacles, we can be confident that these young people will respond well.”

SELECTED THEMES IN REPORT'S FINDINGS

For this report, FPWA held five focus groups with approximately 65 youth currently in New York City's foster care system. As part of research for this report, FPWA also held in-depth interviews with six former foster youth that had experienced homelessness once they had aged out of the foster care system. In an effort to hear from providers for this report, FPWA anonymously surveyed 50 workers from child welfare, legal representation, social work, advocacy, workforce, and adoption organizations. Additionally, as a follow-up, FPWA conducted in-depth interviews with representatives from six provider agencies working with aging out youth on housing issues.

CHALLENGES IN PREPARING YOUTH FOR AGING OUT OF CARE

- According to the FPWA survey of professionals who work with youth aging out of care, 87% pointed to difficulty for youth to prepare for managing education, employment, housing, independent living, and sometimes child care on their own.
- Youth and caseworkers recognized that there was a large disconnect between how they each view their relationships and whether they are helpful, solid and reliable.
- Youth interviewed said that often their peers lack responsibility and commitment to their own futures, and youth also recognized that many did not complete tasks or attend classes with their agencies. Youth added that mental health issues further impede them from securing and maintaining housing.
- Caseworkers report that they must be constantly persistent with youth in order to secure housing in a timely manner, sometimes going above and beyond with their level of commitment.
- Caseworkers at agencies have a strong focus on work readiness, intended to allow youth to maintain housing and function as independent adults once they have aged out. Agencies recognize that youth will be unable to maintain secure housing if they are unable to obtain and keep employment.
- Agencies are placing a premium on creating a mind-set of self-reliance and independent thinking for the youth. Agencies seek to implement innovative approaches to ready their clients for successful adulthood such as financial literacy programs, father engagement for parenting youth, and targeted life skills programs for older youth.

BUREAUCRATIC HURDLES AND LACK OF COORDINATION OF CITY SERVICES

- When asked to rate on a scale how important the problems have been for youth to receive public housing, 38% of caseworkers ranked obstacles with eligibility requirements "very important."
- Youth reported difficulties with the housing application process. Even once the applications are complete, youth say that there are generally excessive wait times.
- If youth have their public housing applications rejected, 88% of caseworkers cited the youth's lack of income. 48% also indicated that it was due to youth having a criminal record.
- When asked to rate on a scale how important the problems have been for youth to receive supportive housing, 67% of caseworkers indicated that lack of income was a "very important" problem.
- When asked why pregnant or parenting youth have more of a challenge obtaining housing, 72% of caseworkers said youth had trouble after aging out as a result of supportive housing programs not accommodating youth with children.

LIMITED HOUSING OPTIONS, HARD TO TRANSITION AND MAINTAIN HOUSING WITHOUT ANY SUPPORT, AND LACK OF AFTERCARE SERVICES

- When asked where youth have ended up if unable to get placement in public housing or supportive housing, 36% of caseworkers reported that the youth ended up homeless.
- One respondent stated that, “Youth end up homeless because it is complicated to navigate systems and develop good relationships without guidance and support.”
- When asked about the outcomes of former foster youth that they are in touch with six months after emancipation, 44% of caseworkers cited that these youth were residing in homeless shelters. Nearly 40% of caseworkers have had 17 or more youth age out in the last three years. In addition, it can be conservatively estimated that surveyed caseworkers had at least 464 youth in total that aged out of care in their caseloads in the last three years.
- In the last three years, 71% of caseworkers indicated that—at the time they aged out—none of their pregnant and parenting youth received supportive housing.
- 63% of workers interviewed agreed or strongly agreed that youth end up homeless because they do not do what they are supposed to or are not prepared for adult challenges.
- When asked about the problems that youth had during the housing process, 73% responded a lack of GED or high school diploma.
- When asked why former foster youth had to leave NYCHA housing, 80% reported that youth were not able to balance their expenses of living on their own. Additionally, a large number reported that youth were unable to maintain public assistance. In the “other” category, respondents indicated, “evicted due to non-payment of rent,” and that, “They are not compliant with public assistance mandates and therefore get sanctioned. They are also in rent arrears and unable to successfully navigate HRA, NYCHA and court systems on their own.”
- When asked where do pregnant or parenting youth end up who have been discharged from supportive housing or public housing, the largest percentage reported that these youth ended up living with families or friends (48%). Another 29% ended up in the homeless shelter system.
- Youth described struggling with the abrupt transition of aging out. Youth have trouble adjusting to total independence after spending long periods of time in a rigid, structured system. Youth have trouble accessing and maintaining social supports and public services.
- Without any real job or educational experience, youth reported that stable housing can be difficult to keep up. Educational gaps in the foster youth population make securing a job even more difficult.
- Agency representatives report that youth return to the agency for support and guidance long after aging out. Even though their official involvement has ended, the youth rely upon the lasting relationships with agency staff. In the absence of government funded aftercare, these bonds are often the only place aged out youth have to turn when things go wrong in their lives.
- Youth often leave the foster care system struggling to maintain housing for more than just themselves and become young parents themselves. They are then tasked with securing housing for themselves and their children. While programs exist for young parents, this decreases the options available to the youth aging out in regards to housing.

LACK OF PERMANENCY

- When asked about housing outcomes for youth at the time that they aged out in the past three years, 29% of workers indicated that only a few of their youth were discharged to adoption or reunited with family. 31% of workers indicated that several youth had gone to live with family or friends.
- When asked where have youth ended up if they are unable to get placement in public housing or supportive housing, 15% of youth returned to stay with their family, whom they were removed from as a result of abuse or neglect in the first place. Another 15% were able to find a couch or temporary stay with friends.
- Youth that have been able to find stability and security in foster care sometimes choose to return to their birth parents and relatives after aging out, which can be tumultuous and traumatic.
- Youth report that they “couch surf” or move from place-to-place. They stay with friends, former foster parents and family members. Even when youth turn to family members, they struggle with retaining stability.
- Youth interviewed described how their lack of trust affected their ability to connect and establish relationships. It is often difficult for youth to ask for help and seek out services available to them independently when they have been guided by the system for so long.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR ACS AND CITY ADMINISTRATION

1. CREATE AN INTER-AGENCY TASK FORCE WITH THE POWER TO ADDRESS INTER-AGENCY ISSUES FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

- While there are and have been attempts to foster interagency solutions to housing issues facing youth, they have not been as effective as necessary. We propose the formation of a solution-driven, inter-agency task force between the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the Department of Education (DOE), the City University of New York (CUNY), the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS), Human Resources Administration (HRA), the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) for youth aging out of care issues. In addition, this taskforce must also include community-level/ grassroots organizations and take stock of the existing services that they provide as well.

2. REDUCE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING HOUSING THROUGH NYCHA AND IMPROVE ITS COORDINATION WITH ACS

- Improve coordination between ACS and NYCHA.
- Reduce requirements for receiving the presumptive budget letter that NYCHA requires youth aging out to get from HRA.
- Increase the number of NYCHA apartments choices for youth aging out of care.

3. RESTORE, CREATE AND/OR INCREASE FUNDING FOR HOUSING PROGRAMS THAT AID BOTH YOUTH AGING OUT AND FORMER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

- Reinstitute automatic discharge grants for up to \$750 per youth, and eliminate the requirement for approval of reimbursement process of expenses.
- Increase the ACS housing subsidy to reflect current rental rates for low-income housing, using City funds.
- Allow funding for flexible housing support, including monies for youth to pay rent to former foster parents.
- Increase funding for the Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) services since they serve former youth in foster care up to 21 years old.
- Create a new NY-NY IV agreement, which will increase the supply of slots for supportive housing for homeless people including young adults aging out of care and especially pregnant and parenting teens.
- Increase the number of NY/NY III supportive housing units for all youth aging out of the foster care system and specifically for youth aging out of care that have children.

4. BUILD UP AND EXTEND AFTERCARE TO YOUNG ADULTS AGED OUT OF CARE UP TO 25 YEARS OLD THROUGH THE PROVISION OF HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

- Create the infrastructure that is needed (guidelines, funding, etc.) for agencies to ensure that aged out youth can still access adequate assistance after leaving care and are allowed to "come back" to aftercare as needed.
- Collect and publicly release data on youth in foster care outcomes after discharge, focusing on the use of DHS and DYCD shelters by former youth in foster care.

- Create pathway to ensure youth have a consistent person that each can call on, a resource that he or she knows and trusts. Youth exiting the foster care system need a solid permanent relationship with a trusted, appropriate adult to help them navigate challenging life decisions.
- Intensify family finding efforts for youth with APPLA goals. While the impulse is to work towards independent adulthood with older youth in group home or residential treatment settings, they are still very much in need of familial supports. These youth often present a placement challenge, but the efforts to find them a permanent family should be redoubled. ChildSuccessNYC, a pilot evidence-based model for foster care, should include specific, targeted strategies to better serve older youth in nontraditional foster care.

FOR FOSTER CARE PROVIDERS

1. IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF WORKSHOPS FOR YOUTH

- Change up the workshops so that they are different each time and so that they teach actual skills that will be necessary for a 21 year old living on their own for the first time.
- Agencies should bring in successful aged out youth in foster care to teach some of the workshops, as they know first-hand which skills need to be taught in order to succeed after aging out.

2. TRAIN WORKERS AND FOSTER PARENTS MORE THOROUGHLY

- This could include empathy training for all workers and foster parents, as well as more specialized trainings for those who will be working with different types of youth such as mentally disabled youth, LGBT youth, or pregnant youth.

3. CREATE A FORMAL PROCESS TO INCORPORATE FEEDBACK FROM YOUTH

- Attain feedback from youth on how they are experiencing participating in workshops, interacting with caseworkers and their agency, life in the group home or foster home.

4. MAKE FAMILY CONNECTIONS AND PERMANENCY EFFORTS A KEY ASPECT OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES.

- While concrete skills are vital to youth aging out of care, without permanent, adult supports youth are often set up for failure. Preparing Youth for Adulthood and Independent Living Services workers should make helping youth connect to these vital emotional support resources an

emphasized piece of their curriculum for all youth.

BEST PRACTICES FROM STAFF AT FOSTER CARE AGENCIES

1. CREATE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

- Internship programs allow youth to obtain that initial experience and skill in order to make them more employable as they age out. The programs create a safe, low risk environment for the youth learn things like interview skills, work place behavior, and how to be a valuable employee.

2. UTILIZE SPECIALIZED WORKSHOPS FOR OLDER CLIENTS

- Agencies have found success in creating specialized workshops for their older youth. Youth 18–21 attend workshops solely focused on employment, education and housing, as these are the most vital and interconnected issues facing them as they age out.

3. IMPLEMENT MONEY MANAGEMENT TRAINING AND PROVIDE THEM A MECHANISM TO PRACTICE THESE SKILLS

- Workshops with financial professionals provide youth with basic financial literacy to help them manage their money as independent adults. Providers have also found it helpful to create a system where youth are responsible for managing their stipend, expenses, and budgeting.

INTRODUCTION: HOMELESS CRISIS FACING YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

In order to put these findings and recommendations into context, it is crucial to understand the challenges that youth aging out of care face. To explore these obstacles further, this report seeks next to understand how ACS (Administration for Children's Services) assists youth aging out of care with housing; learn from current and former youth in foster care; analyze survey findings from staff who work

with youth aging out of care; explore best practices from foster care agencies; and finally, offer recommendations for policy changes to New York City government, ACS and provider agencies. However, before discussing the city system, the report will begin by reviewing recent demographic changes.

Demographic changes correspond to the large numbers of youth that are aging out of foster care. As the number of children in the city's foster care system has decreased in recent years—from 27,243 in fiscal year 2001 to 11,908 in fiscal year 2013—the makeup of the foster care census has shifted.² In

KEY STATISTICS ABOUT YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

	Demographic Changes
Makeup of the foster care census has shifted	In 2011, 40% of youth in foster care were ages 12–17, nearly 25% are ages 6–11, and 35% are under 6 years old.
Increasing percentage of older youth	Percentage of the foster care system that is composed of young adults aged 18 to 21 has grown from 9% in 2001 to more than 13% in 2011.
	National Trends in Housing Outcomes
Housing instability	Over 2/3 of the youth reported living in 3 different places since emancipation.
Homelessness	24% of youth reported being homeless at least once since emancipated from foster care.
Couch-surfing	37% reported either couch-surfing or being homeless.
	NYC Homeless Trends
2006	26% of the youth who aged out of the foster care system were found to have entered the shelter system.
2007	20% of the young people in shelter had a history of some kind with the child welfare system.
2008	20% of former foster care youth enter a homeless shelter after three years of being discharged.
2010	15% of young people aging out entered the homeless shelter system within two years.
2013	Estimated that between 18–26% of youth who age out become homeless and on any night, many former youth in foster care can be found couch-surfing, sleeping on the streets, or in shelters.

2011, the city reported that 40% of youth in foster care are ages 12–17, nearly 25% are ages 6–11, and 35% are under 6 years old.³ There were approximately 4,800 children and young adults in care over the age of 12. In addition, in 2011, the percentage of the foster care system that is composed of young adults aged 18 to 21 had grown from 9% in 2001 to more than 13%.⁴ In recent years, approximately 800–900 youth per year have aged out of foster care on their 21st birthdays in New York City. With the increasing percentage of older youth, it is more important than ever to ensure that they age out of the system successfully.

While there is no current publicly available data from ACS on housing outcomes for youth that aged out, previously estimates have indicated that more than a quarter of youths discharged from foster care because of their age end up homeless. It is estimated that between 18–26% of foster youth who age out become homeless and on any night, many former youth in foster care can be found sleeping on the streets, park benches, couch-surfing, or in shelters.

Yet, it is significant to note that there are many common national trends in housing outcomes for youth that age out of care. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago studied former foster care youth in various states when the youth were 17–18 years old and then did follow up interviews when the youth turned 23–24. They found that: “Over 2/3 of the youth reported living in 3 different places since emancipation, including 30% of youth who had lived in 5 places or more. 24% of youth reported being homeless at least once since emancipated from foster care. 28% of youth reported couch surfing. 37% reported either couch surfing or being homeless.”⁵

Turning to New York City, in 2010, Child Welfare Watch reported that an internal ACS study showed that within two years, 15% of young people aging out entered the homeless shelter system. More than half of those young adults are mothers, entering shelters

Homelessness is correlated with terrible outcomes that are damaging and cost New York City millions annually; such as crime, prison, re-entry, public assistance, use of homeless shelters, Medicaid and other social services.

with children of their own. According to DHS data, the number of young adults that are 18 to 29 year old in city homeless shelters had grown 42% from 18,770 in 2002 to 32,277 in 2009.⁶ In 2008, ACS and the city’s Department of Homeless Services (DHS) identified that at least 20% of former foster care youth enter a homeless shelter after three years of being discharged.⁷

In 2007, during a New York City Council hearing, ACS Commissioner John Mattingly stated that, according to a data match completed about one and a half years ago, approximately 20% of the young people in shelter had a history of some kind with the child welfare system.⁸ The same year, at another Council hearing, DHS Commissioner Robert Hess stated that approximately 26% of the youth who aged out of the foster care system were found to have entered the shelter system.⁹ In 2007, the Empire State Coalition surveyed over 1,000 youth who were either homeless or at-risk for homelessness. 28% (270) reported experience in the foster care system. Of note, the surveys were done at youth programs, runaway shelters, transitional living programs, adult homeless programs, on the street, and other miscellaneous sites.¹⁰

Significantly, homelessness is correlated with terrible outcomes that are damaging and cost New York City millions annually; such as crime, prison, re-entry, public assistance, use of homeless shelters, Medicaid and other social services. Homeless youth

on average experience drastically higher rates of malnutrition (because they lack access to health care), violence, delinquency, and reliance on public assistance. Studies report that homeless youth, for fear of being mistreated at a homeless shelter, often trade sexual favors for a place to sleep at night. Studies also report that 56% of emancipated foster care males are currently incarcerated while 25% of males will become incarcerated within the first two years of their emancipation.¹¹

AN OVERVIEW: ACCESSING HOUSING FROM THE NYC FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Given the potential negative outcomes for youth that age out of care, it is necessary to understand the role of the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in regard to the foster care system and how that relates to youths' abilities to access housing. Once ACS policies and services are clear, it will be possible to identify problematic aspects of the youth aging out of care experience and propose solutions to improve housing outcomes. To gather this information, FPWA utilized a variety of sources, including government documents, journal articles, reports, testimonies, and information from experts in the field. This involved researching the ACS organizational structure, programs, regulations and applications processes for accessing housing. To complete this section, FPWA also sought to understand subsidized housing programs by compiling information on the ACS housing subsidy, NYCHA housing, and supportive housing.

State Regulations: Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement

As per state regulations, ACS is responsible for helping youth prepare for independent living in the following ways. First, ACS' policy requires that foster care providers help youth develop life skills for an APPLA (Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) goal beginning after their 16th birthday. For youth with an APPLA goal, "the caseworker is prompted to discuss, or outline in the youth's case record, responses to a set of questions...that [ACS has] established for all caseworkers, that address housing, income, medical coverage, arrangements to receive essential documents, like birth certificates, Social Security numbers, etc., arrangement with any needed service providers and any safety concerns" at the given 90-day notice.¹² Of note, all youth must be given a 90-day notice of intent to discharge from care.

Second, the provider must begin a transition plan for youth 180 days prior to their 18th birthday and must complete the plan 90 days prior to scheduled discharge. The plan must include specific options for housing, health insurance, as well as education and employment opportunities. ACS must also ensure that they or provider agencies are keeping track of youth and ensuring that they submit applications according to their deadlines and notifying them if there have been any changes in application statuses.¹³

As a continuation of state mandated responsibilities, ACS must ensure, upon discharge, that suitable housing is available for at least one year for youth that are preparing for independent living. "A youth under the age of 21 may not be discharged with a goal of APPLA unless he or she has a residence other than a shelter for adults, shelter for families, single-room occupancy hotel or any other congregate living arrangement which houses more than ten unrelated persons".¹⁴ These restrictions on the types of acceptable housing are laid out by state regulation. Given the market price of standard apartments and the lack of available subsidized housing within New York City, these restrictions are often hard for ACS and provider agencies to abide by.

For youth with an APPLA goal, a trial discharge is required for all youth aging out of care between the ages of 18 to 21 years old. After turning 21 years old, the youth is not subject to a trial discharge. A trial discharge can mean one of two things. First, it may mean that the child's family has fulfilled the necessary requirements to be able to care for them again. If this is the case, the child may be released back to the family for a trial discharge for up to three months. During this time, a caseworker will regularly monitor the family and if the trial period is successful the child may undergo final discharge from foster care. State regulations require that all youth aged 16 and older who are discharged to APPLA or "deemed" discharged to APPLA—which is discharge to parents

or relatives—must be on trial discharge for a period of at least six months. After turning 18 years old, youth who are aging out can also request to sign themselves out of care and undergo trial discharge.

The trial discharge typically goes for six months, and during that time ACS is responsible for keeping track of the youth even though they can live on their own. However, the family court system can extend trial discharge every six months until the youth turns 21. In fact, some trial discharges go on for quite lengthy timeframes. The problem is that while the agency caseworker is required to do all the casework, the agency is not reimbursed by the city for these days. Before youth are discharged, the agency must continue to assist youth in finding services, and providing clothing allowances and Independent Living stipends. The agency must help youth find housing or take youth back into a group or foster home if the youth becomes homeless during this period. Additionally, as a result of a 2012 Class Action Lawsuit settlement detailed later on, ACS is required to provide supervision for all youth discharged from foster care until the age of 21. The lawsuit settlement requires that caseworkers must contact the youth by phone or in person on a monthly or quarterly basis depending on the individual situation.

If the youth does not have housing and is approaching their 21st birthday, ACS must assess whether they are eligible for a presumptive budget letter. The letter estimates projected income, whether or not they are eligible for public assistance, and helps them get approved for NYCHA or NY/NY III.¹⁸ If youth meet one of the following criteria they are eligible for the letter: they are parenting with a child under the age of 5, they have severe mental or physical illness, or if they are unemployed and have been looking for employment for at least 90 days.¹⁹

In an effort to improve outcomes for youth that age out, ACS seeks to connect the youth aging out to a network of supports including relationships with community providers of needed services, support

ACS indicated that the achievement of the PYA goals will reduce the number of youth who have unstable housing by increasing the number of youth in foster care who have adequate income and connections to adults.

groups, and other after-care services.²⁰ To facilitate these services, ACS aims to provide technical assistance to provider agencies to promote increased discharge planning and stronger connections to caring adults at discharge. Of note, ACS has recently established a new policy procedure designed to ensure that the foster care agencies comply with their obligation to provide post-discharge supervision to youth until age 21, which is discussed in a subsequent section as a part of lawsuit settlement.

City Policies: Preparing Youth for Adulthood and Housing Support Services

ACS' own city efforts to address the needs of youth aging out of include the Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA) program and include emphases on permanent connections (such as family or adult figures), life skills development, and financial skills.²¹ In June 2006, ACS released the Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA) plan to enhance services for youth in the foster care system and improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care. The PYA plan has six distinct goals, one of which is that all youth who have aged out of foster care will reside in stable living situations.²² In specific, ACS indicated that the "achievement of the PYA goals will reduce the number of youth who have unstable housing by increasing the number of youth in foster care who have adequate income and connections to adults."²³ Furthermore, ACS outlined that: "Children's Services intends to redouble its efforts to ensure that each young person leaving foster care has safe and stable

housing, by: continuing our work with NYCHA to provide youth in need of housing with public housing and...helping youth in need of supportive housing through the New York/New York III initiative, and working with provider agencies to link youth to other community housing resources.”²⁴ ACS has stated it would measure this goal through analyzing system-wide outcomes and monitoring the progress of each of its contract foster care agencies.²⁵

Of note, ACS stated in the 2006 plan that “a baseline measurement of the use of DHS and DYCD shelters by former youth in foster care will be established over the next year, and the percentage of discharged youth who use these shelters within two years of discharge will decrease.”²⁶ In the year following the release of the report, ACS also indicated in testimony to the City Council that it would begin to look for increases in the number of youth discharged to “safe and stable housing.”²⁷ However, despite collaborations with DHS and DYCD, ACS has not released any public data on youth in foster care outcomes, so it is not clear whether ACS has actually taken the initiative to measure DHS and DYCD shelter use by former youth in foster care, and how they have acted in response to the numbers. At a recent City Council hearing, in response to a question, the ACS Commissioner reported that he did not know how many former youth in foster care are residing in DHS and DYCD shelters or what is currently the percent of discharged youth who use these shelters within two years of discharge, and that he would report back to the City Council.

The PYA plan and program was developed to coordinate “the efforts of ACS and its contracted agencies to link youth with mental and physical health services, employment, education, housing, and any other relevant services to make their transition out of foster care and into adulthood as smooth as possible.”²⁸

- In 2006, ACS reported that it would invest annually in the budget a total \$19 million dollars for the PYA initiative, including “\$13.5 million in flexible Chafee Independent Living dollars, and reallocating an additional \$5.5 million in other funds.”²⁹
- The PYA program provides this funding to providers, who have often implemented it through holding workshops for youth aging out of care and offering support services focused on housing and employment for youth. However, there is no required curriculum and many agencies have developed their unique formats.
- Currently, according to foster care agencies, the PYA program provides an allocation of \$2,700 per child aged 14–21 for providers to work with each of their youth in this age group.³⁰
- Of note, the PYA program has been affected by city budget cuts over the last few years. While the city’s adopted budget in 2013–2014 provided a funding adjustment in the amount of \$20,000 to support ACS staff to provide PYA trainings through the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), the budget for PYA funding was reduced by \$1.9 million in Fiscal Year 2010–2011, and \$2.7 million in Fiscal Year 2011–2012 and the following budget years.
- In FY 2013–2014, there were no restorations made. Based on the budget numbers above, it would indicate that PYA is now annually funded at \$16.3 million dollars.
- ACS has explained that the current per child allocation will continue to be maintained, as a savings will be achieved as a result of the declining foster care census and is not a reduction in service.

There has been a perception amongst agencies and youth that funding was no longer available for expenses such as clothing or furniture for older youth. This is, however, not the case. Funding is still available but agencies are being asked to justify and

itemize the expenses, which are then reimbursed by ACS. Some agencies have taken more advantage of this change in policy than other agencies.

As an additional support for youth aging out of care, ACS is currently working on a concept paper for older youth services that will be offered to existing providers and community organizations in order to help frame a Request for Proposals (RFP), which ACS expects to release at a later date for implementation of services. In other states, using Chafee Independent Living dollars, similar RFPs have been issued to provide a range of services to meet the unique needs of youth who are aging out of foster care. A typical priority has been to provide services that allow the youth to experience situations that build social relationships and networks.

Over the last decade, ACS has launched a number of efforts to strengthen access to housing, improve accountability for housing, and ensure preparations for living independently in housing for youth aging out of care.³¹ Importantly, ACS has gained access to the NYCHA database, which enables them to track the progress of applications for housing that they submit on behalf of youth leaving care. Furthermore, ACS created the Housing Support Services (HSS) unit.

Additionally, HSS has developed a series of one-page desk guides that clearly describe the eligibility guidelines and application process and procedure for

their internal Housing Subsidy Program and NYCHA public housing, as well as offer a contact number for accessing help. Each of these desk guides have been broadly distributed to provider agencies, attorneys for children, and directly to youth. In order to develop additional housing support for youth aging out of care, ACS has noted that, “Many of [ACS’s] provider agencies now have a staff person focused on housing needs of young people and [ACS] is working with agencies that do not have someone in place to help them identify and train staff.”³²

ACS has also entered into a partnership with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) in an effort to better service the families and youth aging out of care involved with both agencies. As a result of the recent ACS/DHS partnership, an information-sharing database was also created.³³ In addition, ACS and DHS have developed a working group that meets regularly whose focus is strengthening and expanding data sharing on child protective and preventive cases, including open cases and cases within the past ten years, to identify young people in shelters.³⁴

In addition, ACS’ approach to processing housing applications has also been revamped and streamlined. The ACS website explains that, “Youth aging out of care and their case managers from their agencies or ACS can now meet face-to-face with HSS specialists on a walk-in basis during business hours Monday-Friday at 150 William Street (8th floor) in Manhattan. The HSS specialists will provide counseling, make referrals, and assist with the completion of related forms regarding the following: Housing Subsidy & Special Grants/One Shot Deal; NYCHA Public Housing; New York/New York, III and Contact Housing Support Services.”³⁵

To assist young adults with a permanency planning goal of APPLA to find appropriate housing, HSS has launched a new training initiative with foster care and preventive agency partners to help youth who choose to leave before turning 21 find housing. Most recently, ACS implemented the Housing Academy

Over the last decade, ACS has launched a number of efforts to strengthen access to housing, improve accountability for housing, and ensure preparations for living independently in housing for youth aging out of care.

Collaborative (HAC) to help improve the process of youth in foster care transitioning to adulthood. This is an educational program to help youth in foster care ages 16–21 transition to adulthood. In order to develop their curriculum, ACS partnered with NYCHA and HPD. The program teaches youth important independent living skills such as “how to complete applications for housing and education, key techniques to improve interview skills, how to locate jobs through online resources, and how to negotiate with creditors and explore landlord and tenant rights.”³⁶ Case planners at provider agencies are also encouraged to attend HAC trainings with their youth clients and some have done so. An important component of HAC that is available to case planners at providers is the quarterly trainings with agency staff to understand the application process with NYCHA and supportive housing. ACS urges agencies to send their designated staff to these trainings. Of note, ACS has stated that the HAC initiative was in response to the high number of negative housing outcomes for youth that aged out, such as youth that were evicted from public housing. This initiative differs from providers’ independent living workshops in that it is a very targeted curriculum to address problems for youth in public housing that were identified by NYCHA and HPD. However, the HAC program is too new to produce any data to determine if participation in the training will result in any change regarding tenancy issues for youth aging out of care.

In discussing city programs and policies, it is also important to mention programs that were discontinued by ACS in recent years. Previously, ACS offered a \$500 automatic discharge grant to all youth leaving care. Later, this grant was increased up to \$750, based on need. The discharge grant could be used for “broker’s fees, rent, food, furniture, bedding, clothing, and other necessary household items such as cooking utensils.”³⁷ In specific, “the grant was available to aging out youth if they: a) have been in foster care continuously for six months or more; b) have a permanency goal of return to parent, discharge to a fit and willing relative, or independent living

The loss of discharge grants has been a problem that contributes to greater instability for youth leaving care because many of them do not have financial resources to pay for basic costs that one needs to cover when moving into a new apartment.

(“APPLA”); and c) [your] goal is approved or ordered by the Court, and you haven’t received a discharge grant within two years of the current discharge.”³⁸ However, due to a budget shortfall in 2010, ACS eliminated several “supplemental” funding streams not covered by the basic per diem rate, including all discharge grants.³⁹ This has been a problem that contributes to greater instability for youth leaving care because many of them do not have financial resources to pay for basic costs that one needs to cover when moving into a new apartment. Since the automatic discharge grant was eliminated, provider agencies can still decide whether to give a discharge grant on their own and seek to get the eligible expenses reimbursed from ACS. Some providers have held the youth in foster care’s allowance until they age out of care and then provided these funds in place of a discharge grant. By state law, a foster child is supposed to receive a “regular allowance appropriate to age, which shall not be used to meet basic needs.” This is also in addition to the monthly independent living stipend youth are eligible to receive from 16 to 20 years of age. Agencies have different policies about what amount of allowance is appropriate. Some agencies have written policies that say how much youth in foster care are to given, with the amount depending on the child’s age.⁴⁰

On December 31, 2010, ACS dismantled its Supervised Independent Living Program (SILP), which gave 125 teens in foster care the chance to practice living on their own prior to aging out. SILPs gave a young

person who was working and/or attending college the opportunity to live in an apartment setting for 18 months and receive support services. Although the SILPs were independent living apartments, agencies were still mandated by law to assure that upon discharge, every young person had a significant connection to an adult who was willing to be a permanency resource. Some have stated the SILP programs were ended as a result of city budget concerns. For the fiscal year ending July 1, 2010, the SILP program cost \$4,422,317, with the city paying \$1,459,365, or 33%, the state paying 41%, and the federal government 26%. ACS stated that the decision to close the SILP apartments stemmed from its philosophy that young people in foster care are best served living with families. From ACS' perspective, while intended to be a short-term step, the program was utilized for an extended period by younger and younger youth, perhaps impeding progress towards permanency. Without the initiative for concurrent planning, what was meant to be a helpful stepping stone ended up being a place where youth languished, leaving the program in no better a position than when they entered it. For ACS, there was also some concern about placement of an inappropriate population. Some agencies utilized this level of care to house youth who would have been better served by the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) or New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

From the perspective of legal advocates and some providers, they felt that the decision to close SILPS was incorrect and short sighted. The problems that clients had in some of the SILPS are the same problems facing youth in foster homes who often prove challenging for providers to give support, direction and planning to ensure they are discharged with appropriate services in place. However, some of the SILPS programs were successful at preparing young people for adulthood and many clients who were placed there were discharged from care with real plans in place. SILPs also offered one of the only alternatives to older teenagers who, for one reason

or another, did not want to live in a foster home. They urge ACS to re-introduce SILPS and remedy the previous problems by providing better supports to the young people residing in these programs.

Lawsuit Settlement Procedures

Another important layer of policies and procedures relating to services for youth that age out of care came about as a result of a recent lawsuit settlement. In October of 2011, the Legal Aid Society and Lawyers For Children brought a Class Action lawsuit against ACS on behalf of former youth in foster care "who have been or will be unlawfully discharged into homelessness or unsuitable conditions."⁴⁴ The petition described the experience of four individuals for whom ACS had failed in its responsibilities. The plaintiffs were seeking injunctive relief on behalf of all youth ages 17-21 or those already over the age of 21 who were unable to obtain suitable housing. They concluded that the defendants had failed to secure adequate housing for the youth prior to discharge and that they had failed to supervise and monitor youth until they reached the age of 21.

Stated simply, the lawsuit settlement laid out specific requirements for ACS, including life skills training, assistance locating housing, consistent communication with youth regarding their housing search, and continued supervision of discharged youth up to age 21. One result has been a focus on the Preparing Youth for Adulthood Checklist, which foster care agencies are required to complete and the information is then provided to Legal Aid Society and Lawyers for Children.

The plaintiffs were seeking injunctive relief on behalf of all youth ages 17-21 or those already over the age of 21 who were unable to obtain suitable housing.

Provider agency caseworkers go through checklists for both Preparing Youth for Adulthood and discharging youth from care. In the Preparing Youth for Adulthood checklist, the caseworker must go through the youth's permanency planning. This section answers questions pertaining to whether or not the youth has been discharged, if they have gone missing, if they have a criminal record and what their discharge plan for the future is. It also asks whether or not the youth has a permanent, adult mentor to support them. Next, there is a housing section, in which the caseworker must identify which housing options the youth has applied for, when they applied, and if and when there was a response to those applications. Whether or not housing has been approved, the caseworker must also identify any housing barriers the youth faces, such as substance abuse, immigration, criminal history or insufficient income. The youth must also have an emergency housing plan in place. The checklist goes on to further describe the youth's specific education and employment history and what plans they have regarding the future. There is also a section on the youth's individual needs, such as whether or not they need therapy, medication, or if they are pregnant and/or parenting. Lastly, the checklist goes through purely logistical elements such as whether or not the youth has vital records such as a birth certificate, if they are a citizen or applying to become one, and the history and current state of their medical coverage. While all of these sections must be filled out by a caseworker during the youth's stay in the foster care system, they must also be filled out in a separate checklist prior to discharge.⁴⁷

Housing Options for Youth Aging Out

When youth's foster care maintenance payment is cut off at 21 years old, the youth must find a place to live. Oftentimes, a foster parent might tell them that, without the funding for room and board for a child or young person living in their home to meet their expenses, the youth is not able to stay there any longer. However, if a youth turn 21 years old and is still living in a foster home or residential setting

and is awaiting a housing placement, ACS generally grants an exception to policy and will continue to pay the board and administrative rate. So, a youth will age out on their 21st birthday and have to leave their foster home or residential setting, unless they been granted an exception to policy by ACS, or they have secured their own apartment or been discharged to a family member's home to which they can move in to right away.

When aging out of the New York City foster care system, youth have the following options for subsidized housing. Although these housing options are provided by different agencies, ACS is responsible for maintaining communication with them to ensure that youth find stable housing before being formally discharged. First, they can live on their own in an apartment or house. In order to help pay the rent for such a residence, youth can apply for an ACS subsidy. Youth can also live in public housing provided by NYCHA. Finally, youth have the option to live in New York/New York III supportive housing, which offers a variety of programs for homeless youth and adults.

ACS Subsidy

ACS offers different types of housing subsidies and special grants to assist youth in transitioning to independent living. For youth with a goal of APPLA before they turn 21, ACS offers subsidies and grants. ACS operates the Housing Subsidy Program that is available to 18-year-olds who have sufficient income with the subsidy to afford their own apartment. These payments can only be made towards non-subsidized housing. Youth are only eligible for the monthly subsidy until they turn 21 while the one shot grants can be received until the youth is 21.5 years of age.

If youth leave foster care without a rent subsidy and get behind in their rent payments, ACS may also provide cash assistance to prevent a youth's eviction, and youth qualify for this assistance up to six months from the date of discharge from foster care. Under

the program, they are given up to \$300 a month, until a total of \$10,800 is reached. That includes an option to receive two special grants of up to \$1,800 to cover things such as brokerage fees, furniture and more. These special grants are deducted from the total \$10,800 available. Previously, one of these special grants was for \$3,600, but was reduced in the city budget in 2010 to \$1,800. According to the most recent public information on housing subsidies, ACS spent \$3.3 million on rental subsidies in 2003, but this includes “funding for families eligible for identical benefits in cases where children are likely to be placed in foster care because of inadequate housing. A total of 959 young adults and families received ACS rental subsidies in 2003.” Of note, it is unclear how many of the people receiving the subsidy are families being reunited out of foster care versus how many are youth transitioning to live on their own. Based on information from caseworkers and youth, this is used for only a tiny number of youth aging out.

Obviously, given the reality of the housing market, this housing subsidy has often proved not enough to help youth that age out to live in a private apartment. With the extremely low vacancy rate in New York City, Legal Aid Society argues that the housing subsidy is quite insufficient to meet the housing needs, and that it is nearly impossible for youth aging out of care to take advantage of the opportunity. They explain that, “The \$300 amount was set by State law in the 1980s and has not increased, and the City should consider funding its own monthly subsidy, as it’s done for other selected populations, to make this a realistic option for the youth that are leaving care.”

NYCHA Housing

In May 2001, ACS entered into an agreement with NYCHA that gives youth aging out of foster care priority for public housing. With a referral from ACS, youth may receive the N-zero priority code from NYCHA and have priority for placement in a NYCHA housing apartment complex.⁵² According to ACS in 2003, “young people who meet federal eligibility standards—including income thresholds and criminal

Over time, NYCHA has continued to narrow the priority housing for youth in foster care, as applications to NYCHA increased and youth in foster care have had high eviction rates.

background checks—are effectively guaranteed a voucher or public housing apartment.”⁵³ As a result of this agreement, NYCHA became a major housing option for youth aging out of care.

Caseworkers frequently report a lack of coordination between ACS and NYCHA that results in the mishandling of paperwork and agencies not being up-to-date on new housing policies. While a procedure was established as a part of the lawsuit settlement to improve communication, caseworkers are still frequently unaware of the most recent protocols and resources that affect youth as they age out of care and apply for public housing. This lack of awareness often impacts youth’s ability to receive public housing in a timely manner. As part of the lawsuit settlement, ACS “agreed to promulgate, adopt, monitor and enforce” the attached procedures “as mandatory policies.”⁵⁴ The first policy is designed to ensure that there is a clear, uniform procedure used for obtaining housing for youth with a goal of APPLA. The second policy is designed to ensure that the foster care agencies comply with their obligation to provide post-discharge supervision to youth until age 21.

Over time, NYCHA has continued to narrow the priority housing for youth in foster care, as applications to NYCHA increased and youth in foster care have had high eviction rates. The first category to be lost was former youth in foster care who had aged out in the last 12 months. Next, NYCHA increased the income requirements for housing.⁵⁵ It has been disclosed, although NYCHA has not confirmed, that they have recently had to further limit the supply of apartments

for youth aging out. Youth aging out of care have historically been allotted studio apartments in public housing, and the supply of housing units is limited to the number of available studio apartments, which is estimated to be a total of 200–300 studio apartments. As NYCHA has made an effort to move elderly people from larger apartments into studio apartments, it has created fewer housing opportunities for single youth aging out of care. NYCHA will not allow youth to live together as “tenants in common.” Given the further limited supply of housing units, NYCHA apartments only now become open to youth aging out of care if the current tenants—former youth in foster care—leave or are evicted. Consequently, this has significantly reduced NYCHA apartments as a housing option for youth aging out of care.

In the past, in addition to general NYCHA public housing, NYCHA used to issue federally funded Section 8 subsidy vouchers for youth aging out of care, which allowed recipients to pay for housing in rental apartments across the city. Unfortunately, the vouchers were frozen in 2009, though youth aging out of foster care who are already in an apartment and receiving Section 8 benefits continue to receive their benefits.⁵⁶ Some advocates have stated that the lack of Section 8 vouchers has created a huge gap in housing options for youth aging out of care. There is still a number of former foster youth that aged out of care prior to the freeze on vouchers who remain in their Section 8 voucher housing units.

Presently, there are several eligibility requirements to apply for NYCHA housing.

- Youth must be at least 18 years old and contribute 30% of their income to rent payments.
- If the youth is unemployed because of a disability or is a student they may receive Social Security Supplemental Income (SSI) payments from the government or educational grants or loans which can be considered as a source of income to contribute to rent payments in NYCHA housing.
- If the youth is not employed and has no disability,

NYCHA requires youth to provide a presumptive budget letter as proof of future income from public assistance. The presumptive budget letter can be obtained from the Human Resources Administration (HRA).⁵⁷

- In order to receive a presumptive budget letter as proof of income, HRA requires that the presumptive budget letter is only given to youth who are within 90 days of turning 21.

First, ACS must coordinate with HRA to get the letter, and getting the letter can be a drawn-out and difficult process. Often, the youth age out of eligibility for NYCHA’s housing priority before they receive the letter. It repeatedly takes too long for the letter to be obtained which then delays the housing process for youth, at times costing them to lose out on already scarce apartments.

Second, the age limit on applying for the presumptive budget letter also hinders the ability of the youth to secure housing. If a youth submits a housing application at age 19 or 20 and then gets approved, but does not have a job and is not eligible for the presumptive budget letter because they are more than 90 days away from turning 21, then they do not have proof of income and lose their eligibility and cannot apply again for another 18 months. This means that they will not get NYCHA housing before aging out of foster care. Foster care agencies and foster youth are frequently frustrated that they cannot apply earlier so they can get the budget letter approved in time to receive housing. Third, if youth do not have all services in place by age 21 and exceptions to policy are issued to maintain them in foster care, the youth then have issues obtaining budget letters as they have already turned 21. Foster care agencies are frustrated by discrepancies in age eligibility policies, and wonder why there is not an umbrella statement that youth who remain in foster care at any age are still able to obtain necessary paperwork and appropriate services.

The NYCHA application must also be submitted before discharge or trial discharge, otherwise youth will not be eligible to receive housing. There are many components of a NYCHA application that youth must complete before being placed on the list to eventually receive housing. First, the Foster Care Provider Agency Director must sign the Family Reunification Memo or the Youth Independent Living Memo and the Memorandum of Attestation. They also need what is known as CM 622, or, the ACS Housing Assistance Application for Initial Eligibility Determination. Finally, they need a referral letter signed by the Administration for Children's Services.⁵⁸

Once the applications are filled out the applicant usually undergoes the following process: First, the applicant is interviewed, usually within 8 weeks of NYCHA receiving the application. At the interview, the applicant's family size and composition, housing priority, total family income and citizenship/immigration status are determined.⁵⁹ If the applicant passes the interview process, the application is sent to the Applications and Tenancy Administration Department's Screening Unit.⁶⁰ The two steps to screening include a thorough criminal background check for all household members 16 and older and current/previous landlord contact.⁶¹

NYCHA has a strict policy regarding the denial of applications if a Questionable Family Member (QFM) is involved.⁶² This NYCHA requirement often caused in the past for young mothers to be denied public housing if the child's father has a criminal record. By NYCHA regulation, parenting teens are unable to receive housing if the father of their child has a criminal record. NYCHA has a strict and arduous denial policy if they believe that the father of the child with the parenting teen is a QFM. If they investigate and find that the QFM or the father of the child is qualified as an offending person, the parenting teen is denied a NYCHA apartment, even if the young mother no longer has any contact with him. However, NYCHA recently announced will seek

to ease its ban on recently released prisoners and allow some of them to live in public housing as part of a pilot program, and it is possible this change could benefit pregnant and parenting teens who have male partners with criminal records. In the past, ACS has urged NYCHA to change its rules in regard to criminal records and teen parents. Pregnant and parenting girls in the foster care system have the most limited housing options, as many facilities do not accept them.

Only after the applicant passes this process are they then placed on a waiting list until a housing option opens up. The waiting list for NYCHA housing is particularly long as there are more applicants on the list than there are open housing units. When a resident vacates a unit, it is promptly replaced by an applicant on the waiting list. The applicant is contacted as soon as an apartment is made available.⁶³

By NYCHA regulation, foster youth are only given two choices of where to live, and they face a tough choice making this decision knowing that they may forfeit an opportunity for housing if they decline them both. Youth are only allowed to view each of the two apartments separately before making their decision and are only allowed to apply in one borough at a time. Foster care agencies report that foster youth are often reluctant to accept the choices of apartments/locations offered to them. Youth often reject their first choice apartments because it takes the youth too far away from their neighborhoods and extended family members who provide them some comfort and support. In addition, youth reject their apartments choices because the apartments offered aren't cleaned, repaired properly and not up to standards. Sometimes, the housing can be filthy apartments where the youth feel that infants and children would not be safe playing, eating and living in. If the youth rejects both the first and second offers, the application is considered "dead" unless the applicant can establish that a temporary emergency is preventing a move when the second offer was made. Even if the youth can prove such an emergency existed,

the waiting period for housing is 18 months. This presents a significant barrier to accessing safe and secure housing for young people who are transitioning to independence with few resources, and puts them at risk of homelessness.

While some residents leave their NYCHA housing by choice, in recent years, many youth have been asked to leave or evicted by NYCHA authorities because of problems paying the rent or other complaints. Because they often never got the chance to practice living on their own, caseworkers have reported that youth that age out of care were likely to go through a period where they were unable to pay rent due to loss of income or employment and very likely to be evicted.

Supportive Housing

As an alternative to NYCHA housing, which offers complete independence for youth aging out of care or former youth in foster care, supportive housing units provide support services coupled with affordable housing.⁶⁴ Youth who qualify for supportive housing will have applications and eligibility determination routed to ACS. Supportive housing is mainly funded through the NY/NY III Agreement, in which New York State provides the funding while the City focuses on the actual services provided.

Youth aging out of care or former youth in foster care can apply to be served under NY/NY III in two population groups. Population I—Young adults aged 18–25 years leaving or having recently left foster care or who had been in foster care for more than a year after their 16th birthdays and who are at risk of street homelessness or sheltered homelessness. In addition, Population C—Young adults aged 18–25, who have a serious mental illness being treated in a State psychiatric facility or NYS licensed residential treatment facility and are leaving or having recently left foster care and who could live independently in the community if provided with supportive housing, and who would be at risk of street or sheltered homelessness if discharged without supportive housing assistance.⁶⁵

Overall, there are a total of 400 units of supportive housing allocated in the NY/NY III agreement with 200 each for Population I (youth aging out of care) and Population C (youth with serious & persistent mental illness & coming out of psychiatric centers). The city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services share responsibility for funding the units for foster care youth, and DOHMH contracted an additional 14 units for Population I. Consequently, Population I has 214 units, which are all currently occupied. However, of the 200 slated Population C units, there are 37 currently available units. In addition, there will be 16 additional Population C units opening by the end of 2013 and 79 more slated to come online by the end of 2014. The remaining 68 of the 200 Population C units have yet to be developed.⁶⁶

There are two distinct types of supportive housing units—scattered site and congregate—each with different benefits. There are 115 units of scattered site and 99 units of congregate for Population I. All of the Population C units are congregate. Scattered site housing describes rental apartments in the community visited regularly by support staff. Four provider agencies (Jewish Board of Family and Children Services, SCO Family Services, New York Foundling, and St. Vincent Services) run scattered site programs. Congregate sites describe single efficiency studio units in which on-site case management and other services are located within the buildings and where residents live either in mixed or single population buildings. Four provider agencies (Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter, Good Shepherd Services, Lantern Community Services and the Door) run congregate programs.⁶⁷

While there are certainly many benefits, youth that age out of care have reported various challenges associated with supportive housing. Since the goal of supportive housing is ultimately to return residents to self-sufficiency, supportive housing is not permanent for youth and they have to leave after a couple of

years. Within supportive housing, options for youth aging out of care are still severely limited—only a small portion supportive housing units are set aside for youth under the age of 24. Many youth mention that applications for housing are hard to understand and therefore complete. Another problem especially targets pregnant and parenting youth with children. If a young woman becomes pregnant while in supportive housing, she must leave the unit because it is hard to accommodate young families. Although there is a special portion of supportive housing units set aside for families, this is a major challenge for youth.

Existing Support Services for Youth Aged Out

As a follow-up to discussing all the policies and services available to youth prior to aging out of care, it is also important to highlight the critical safety net for youth that have aged out: public homeless shelters. These homeless shelters are run by the city, and as homeless statistics have indicated earlier, youth that have aged out often stay at shelters as a place of last resort when they have nowhere else to go.

DYCD Runaway and Homeless Youth Program

The New York City Department of Youth and

Community Development (DYCD) provides a host of services for runaway and homeless youth that includes Drop-in Centers, Crisis Shelters, Transitional Independent Living programs, and Street Outreach and Referral Services. The goal of DYCD's Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY)'s services are to protect runaway and homeless youth and reunite them with their families when appropriate. Special services are made available to pregnant and parenting youth, those who have been sexually exploited, and LGBTQ youth. The program aims to provide homeless and runaway youth with the tools they need to get off the street and begin a stable life. Historically, the City Council has restored \$7.2 million in the budget to ensure that existing shelter beds and services are not eliminated. With this money, the city funds 250 shelter beds for youth, despite estimates that there are 3,800 RHY in New York City.

DHS SHELTERS

For youth that have already aged out, often their only source of support is accessed through Department of Homeless Services (DHS). However, ACS is legally barred from discharging youth to a shelter environment because of previously mentioned state

HOMELESS SERVICES FOR YOUTH AGED OUT OF CARE

Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD)	Services Provided
Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (RHY)	Drop-in Centers, Crisis Shelters, Transitional Independent Living programs, and Street Outreach and Referral Services.
RHY Housing capacity	The city funds 250 shelter beds for youth, despite estimates that there are 3,800 Runaway and Homeless Youth in New York City.
Department of Homeless Services (DHS)	Services Provided
Public Homeless Shelter System	An extensive system of shelters operated by contracted providers that house single adults (18 years old and over), and families (adults with children, or adult couples without children).
Leveraging Shelters for Housing	Youth that have aged out become eligible for additional state and federally funded housing once they have been homeless for a period of time.

regulations. DHS has an extensive system of shelters operated by contracted providers that house single adults (18 years old and over), and families (adults with children, or adult couples without children).⁶⁸ Youth that have aged out become eligible for additional state and federally funded housing once they have been homeless for a period of time. While homeless shelters are open to former youth in foster care as a form of emergency shelter, they are not widely utilized. Youth report that the shelters tend to be environments where they feel threatened or unsafe. Critical incidents in shelters continue to increase and youth often choose alternatives such as sleeping on the street or subway.

PERMANENCY SERVICES FOR OLDER YOUTH

As a part of its policies and programs, it also important to note ACS has been making a concerted effort for a number of years now to help youth achieve permanency prior to aging out of the system, and address the absence of family relationships and permanency for many youth in foster care. In the 2006 PYA plan, ACS states that “Youth must be connected to a caring adult before the Trial Discharge period, such as a parent, relative, member of the extended family, or another caring adult who is identified by the youth and is committed to the young person beyond the 21st birthday.”⁶⁹

In addition to the PYA, ACS runs several programs geared towards obtaining permanency and lasting adult relationships for older youth in care. In an e-mail message to providers, ACS stated that its Permanency Policy offers: “direction to ACS and foster care provider agency staff on permanency planning for children and youth in foster care; utilizing concurrent planning strategies and casework activities. The goal of this policy is to reduce the time to permanency for children in foster care. The policy emphasizes the use of adoption and Kinship Guardianship as permanency options when reunification is not possible within reasonable timeframes.” In addition, the email message explained that the Parent Support and Recruitment Unit in the Division of Family Permanency Services is focused on “the development and implementation of branding, outreach awareness and marketing strategies to support the recruitment of prospective foster and adoptive parents, the development of educational workshops and forums to current foster parents, and creating outreach initiatives to increase awareness of the need for prospective parents to create homes for the children in ACS’s care.” As it relates to youth aging out of care, ACS’ efforts are targeted to find, recruit, support and properly train foster homes to meet the unique needs of adolescents in foster care.⁷⁰ In this way, the agency hopes that youth are more likely to form a family bond, rather than remain isolated in group home or residential center settings. ACS has also required all foster care agencies to

implement the Family Team Conferencing (FTC) model, which brings all the “players” in a case together to make decisions regarding goals, placement, and discharge.⁷¹ In addition, as a result of the recent lawsuit settlement, ACS has issued a new policy procedure designed to ensure that the foster care agencies comply with their obligation both assist youth in accessing housing and provide post-discharge supervision to youth until age 21.

In addition to programs already in place, ACS has recently rolled out a new pilot evidence based model program, ChildSuccessNYC (CSNYC).

- This program aims to address flaws in the foster care system, which often leaves aged out youth with few connections and little permanency.
- The CSNYC program will provide added supports to foster parents to stabilize children in their placements, resulting in lasting relationships and fewer placement disruptions.
- The program will also strive to cultivate the child’s relationships with their birth parents, supporting the birth parent’s efforts to change and grow.
- The CSNYC program addresses overwhelming caseloads by limiting workers to ten active children and two suspended payment children. Workers will also be further supported by supervisory ratio of 6 staff to each supervisor.
- These targeted supports focus on connecting foster children to caring adults to build their chances at permanency before they age out to independence.
- In Fiscal Year 2014, as a result of a title IV-E waiver, ACS began to add additional provider agencies to the CSNYC program. The program is being piloted with 40% of the system in Fiscal Year 2014 and will be system wide in Fiscal Year 2015.⁷²
- Providers participating in this program are already reporting that CSNYC’s inclusion of family finding is beginning to make a real difference for many kids.

Presently, as a new initiative, ACS is also working on developing competency models for foster parents in order to recruit a different kind of foster parent who will be more of an adult figure in lives of youth in care and improve lasting relationships for youth aging out of care.

The aim will be for foster care providers to implement a new competency-based assessment process in recruiting foster parents.

Finally, for those youth who are adopted, ACS provides funding to a number of provider agencies who have post-adoption programs to further enhance their ability to provide this critical service. ACS also has adoption recruitment contracts with private non-profit providers who recruit adoptive families to also provide post-adoption services.

While the language of permanency is spoken widely at ACS, it seems that in many cases the policy and the practice diverge. Whereas the ChildSuccessNYC program will be immensely helpful for children in traditional foster care, the intended focus is not children already in residential treatment, group homes or therapeutic foster homes. Although family finding is clearly a focus at ACS, it is evident from focus groups and discussions with older youth in care that they are leaving care disconnected and without family supports. Teaching these youth life skills is valuable, but often ineffective when not partnered with familial supports. The goal from the moment a child enters foster care is to return them to a family, whether the one they came from or a suitable, loving alternative.

PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH YOUTH: THE TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

In addition to the valuable insight provided by current and former youth in foster care, it is also vital to hear from the individuals and agencies that work with these youth on a daily basis. In an effort to better pinpoint the main obstacles to stable housing from the perspective of providers and others who work directly with youth aging out of care, FPWA surveyed 50 workers from mostly foster care agencies and as well as several related organizations in the child welfare field.

The “*Housing Issues for Youth Aging Out of Care*” survey was developed by FPWA and administered anonymously from August 1, 2013 until September 16, 2013. It was available using the online website surveymonkey.com (Please see the appendix for the results of the survey). Of the 108 people that were invited to complete the survey, 50 workers participated in the survey. From the 50 surveyed, thirty were completed by caseworkers from 26 child welfare agencies, representing agencies with approximately 70% of ACS family foster care slots within the five boroughs of New York City. In addition, the 20 others surveyed were employed at legal representation, social work, advocacy, workforce and adoption organizations involved in the child welfare field. All the respondents reported having at least one client age out of care in the last three years, with 70% having more than four clients and 39.6% having seventeen or more youth that aged out of the foster care system.

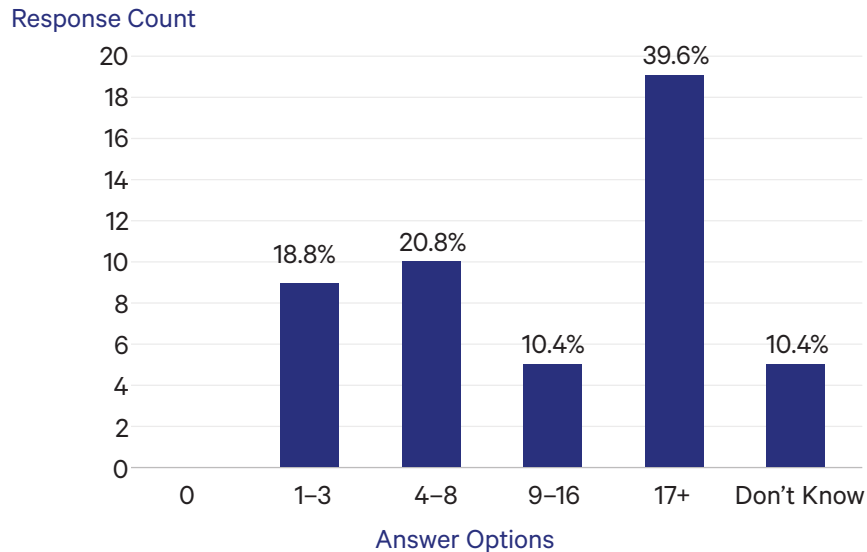
In order to focus on the experiences of clients who had aged out of care, survey participants were asked to respond to 26 multiple-choice questions on seven areas: housing applications and NYCHA; problems securing and maintaining NYCHA and supportive housing; housing outcomes, specifically as they relate to pregnant and parenting youth; ACS Housing Academy Collaborative and other supports for youth aging out of care; education, employment and general outcomes after emancipation; and outcomes for youth who leave NYCHA housing.



- In examining the survey responses, lack of income or employment seems to be a persistent challenge that has an impact on youth's ability to qualify for housing programs.
- Even for youth who take all the necessary steps to get housing, there is also an excessive wait time after completing applications.
- The complexity of applying for these affordable living programs is not the only dilemma facing these youth, but also retaining their independent living situations.
- Once youth are placed in a housing program, youth often have trouble applying their life skills education in the real world and balancing their many new responsibilities.
- Pregnant or parenting youth are often denied housing based on criminal activities on the part of the child's father.
- Parenting youth also have the added pressures of raising a child and securing childcare, so they can pursue education and employment.
- When former youth in foster care lose their housing, they enter homeless shelters, find temporary shelter with friends, or return to families that have a history of abuse and discord.

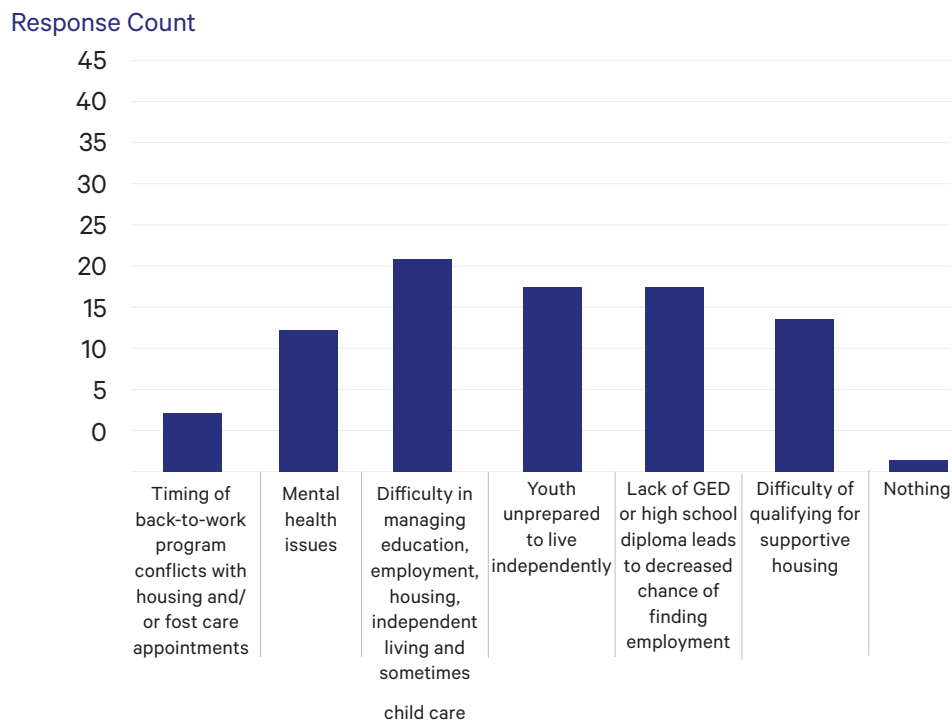
Selected Survey Findings

How many foster youth clients in your caseload aged out within the last three years? (Data based on responses from 48 caseworkers)



* Of note, based on the responses of the 48 caseworkers surveyed for this question, it can conservatively be estimated that they had at least 464 youth that aged out of care in their caseloads within the last three years. This calculation comes from tabulating the average number youth clients for each answer option multiplied by the number of caseworkers that selected that option.

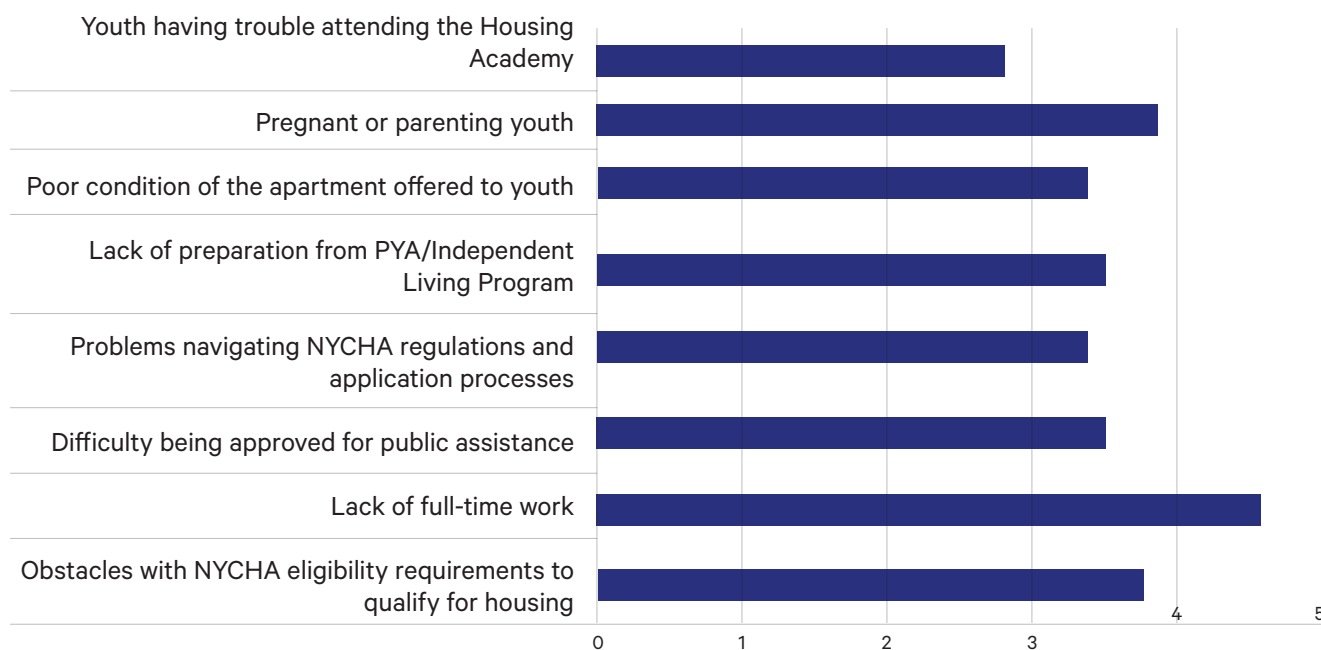
In the past three years, what problems have your youth faced during the process of applying to housing? (check all that apply)*
(Data based on responses from 48 caseworkers)



* Of note, 14 respondents indicated “other” for this question. In the “other” category, one worker explained that, “Applying for housing through the agency is easy, however the timing of (the youth) having income at the interview is a challenge. Availability of housing is also a challenge.”

Please rate on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important) how important the problems below have been for youth to receive NYCHA housing.

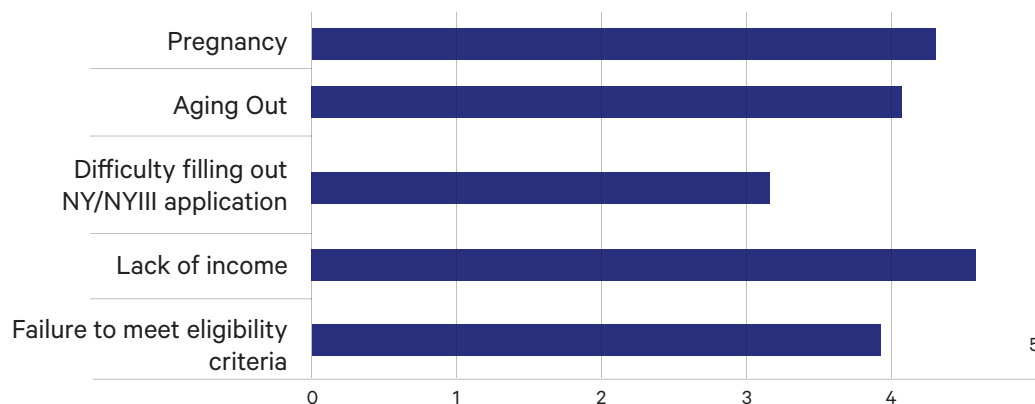
Chart includes weighted average ratings from 44 respondents



* Of note, 4 respondents indicated "other" for this question. In the "other" category, one worker explained that, "LGBTQ population not feeling comfortable in areas of apartments AND lack of employment part time is very important!"

Please rate on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important) how important the problems below have been for youth to receive supportive housing.

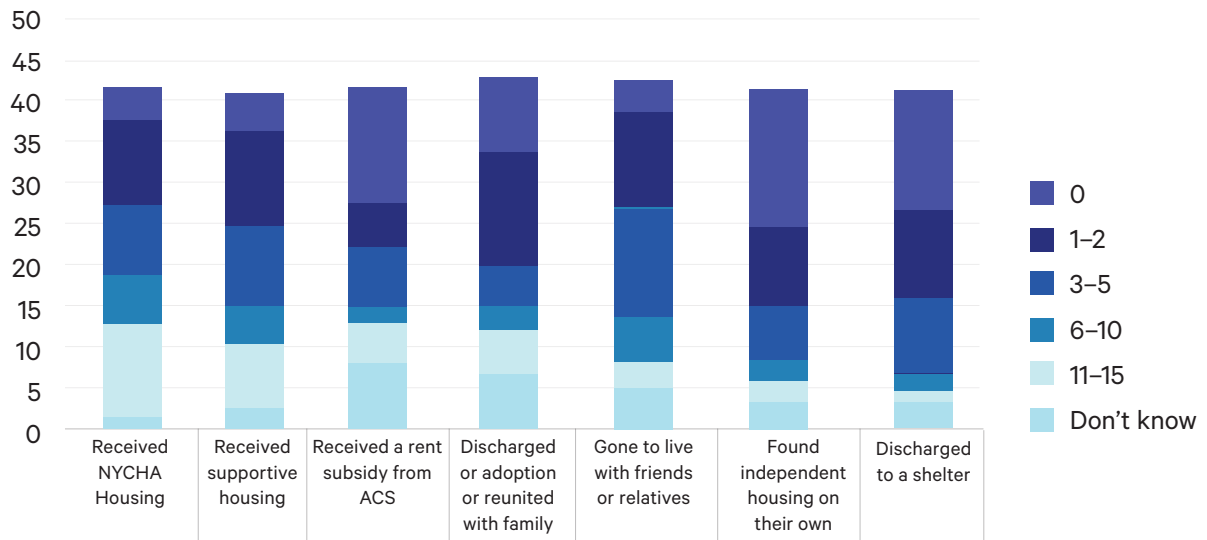
Chart includes weighted average ratings from 44 respondents



* Of note, 4 respondents indicated "other." In the "other" category, respondents mentioned that "85% of client[s] still on waitlist. No availabilities!" and "limited housing options for parenting teens." "Aging out" is a problem because of a limited supply of supportive housing- only a few hundred- designed for youth that have aged out of the foster care system.

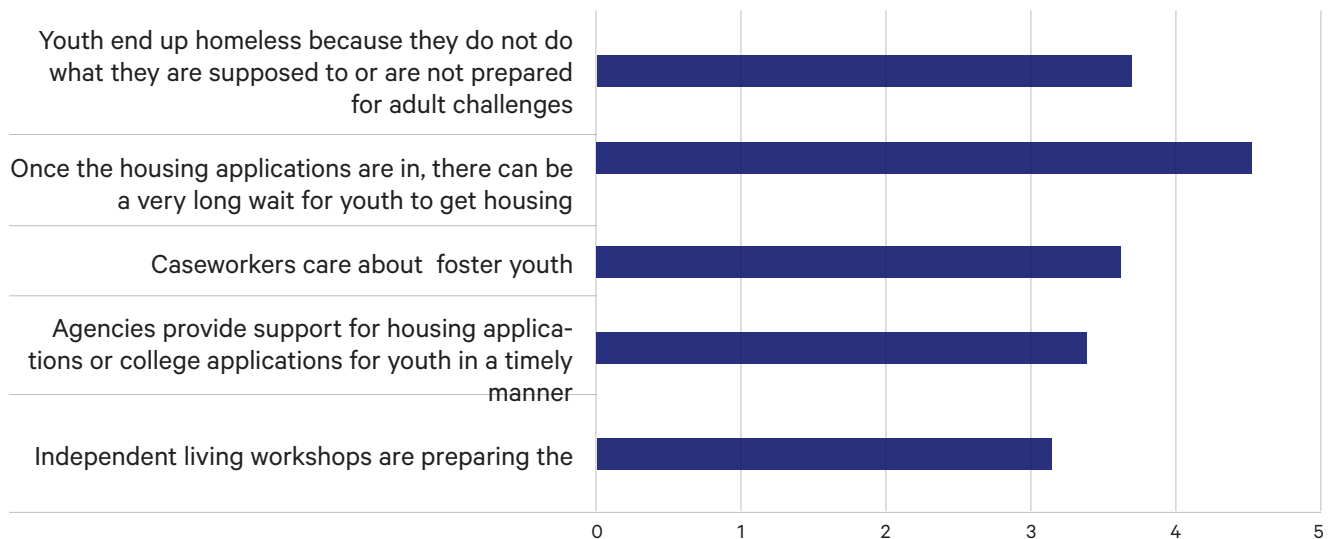
In the past three years, how many of your youth (at the time they aged out) had the following housing outcomes?

Response Count



* Data based on responses from 42 caseworkers, of which, roughly 40% had 17 or more youth that aged out.

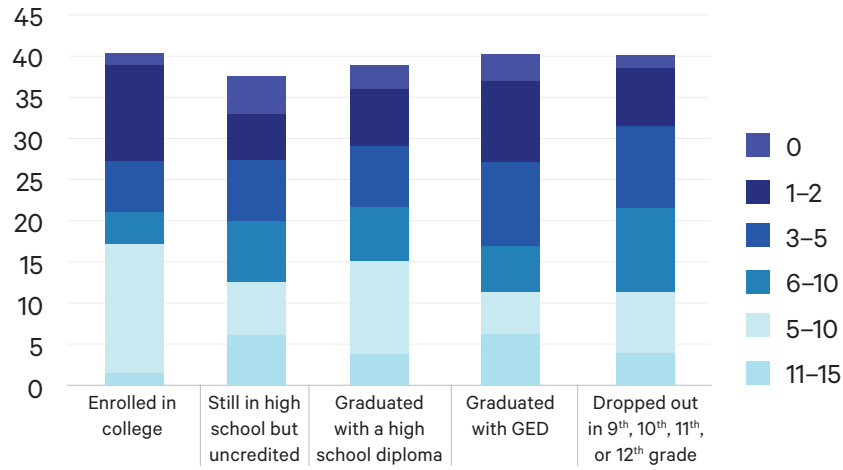
Based on how foster youth themselves experience aging out of care, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), how much do you agree with the following statements? *Chart includes weighted average ratings from 44 respondents*



* In the "other" section, one respondent stated that, "Youth end up homeless because it is complicated to navigate systems and develop good relationships without guidance and support."

In the past three years, how many of your youth have achieved the following educational outcomes?

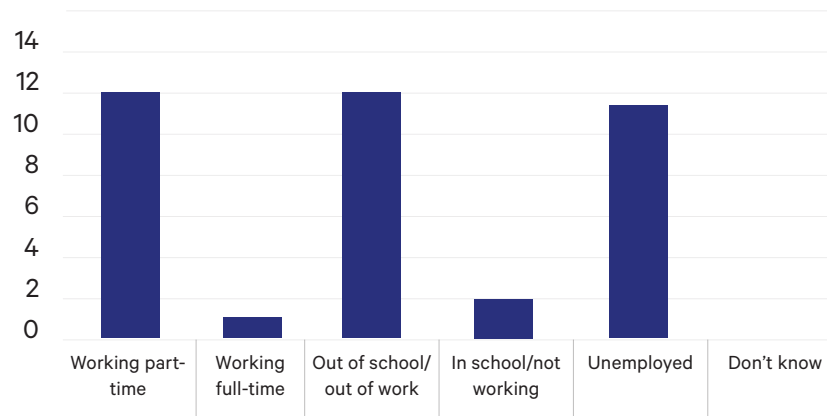
Response Count



* Of note, the data is based on responses from 40 caseworkers, of which, roughly 40% had 17 or more youth that aged out.

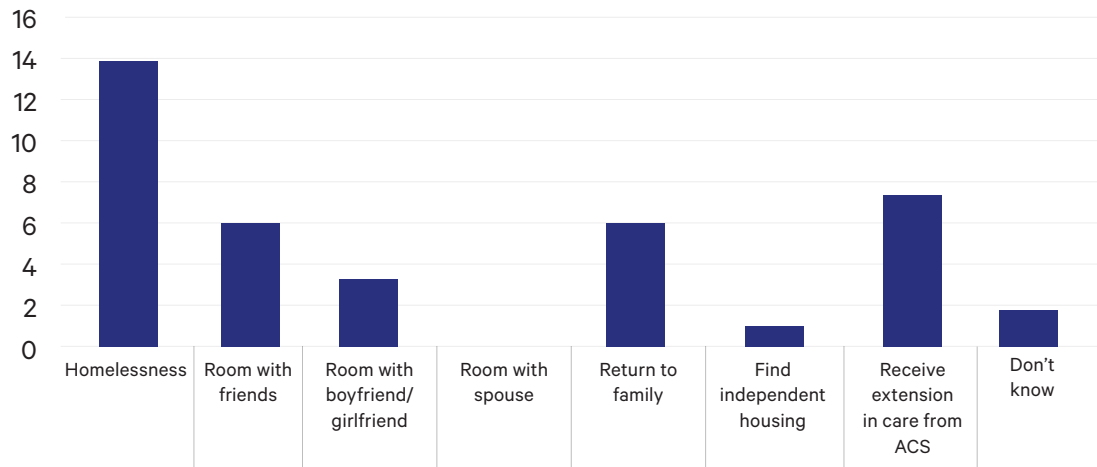
In the past three years, what has typically been the employment history of your youth (at the time that they aged out)? *Data based on responses from 38 case workers*

Response Count



Where have your youth ended up if they are unable to get placement in NYCHA housing or supportive housing? *Data based on responses from 39 case workers*

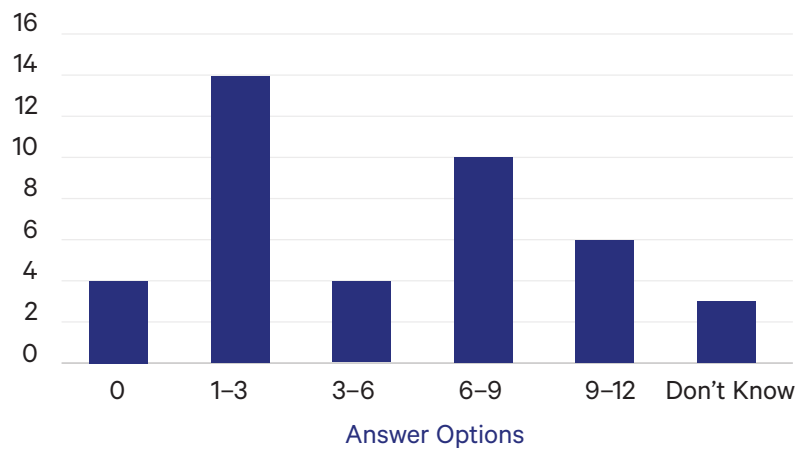
Response Count



*Of note, 6 respondents indicated “other”. In the “other” section, one worker stated, “I consider rooming w friends and family—couch surfing—to be homeless.”

How many former foster youth are you in touch with six months after emancipation? *Data based on responses from 40 caseworkers*

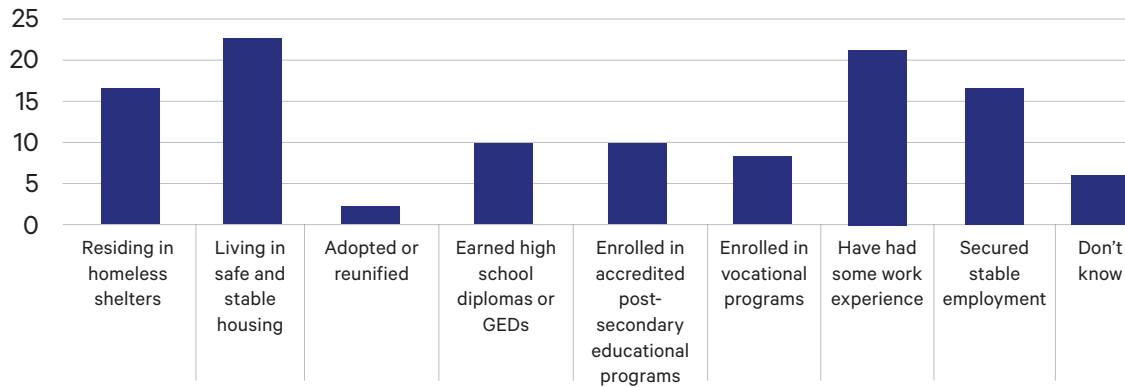
Response Count



*In the “other” category, one worker noted that, “at times we won’t see them until something goes wrong or they need assistance.”

Of the former foster youth you are in touch with six months after emancipation, what are generally their outcomes at that point? (Check all that apply) *Data based on responses from 29 case workers*

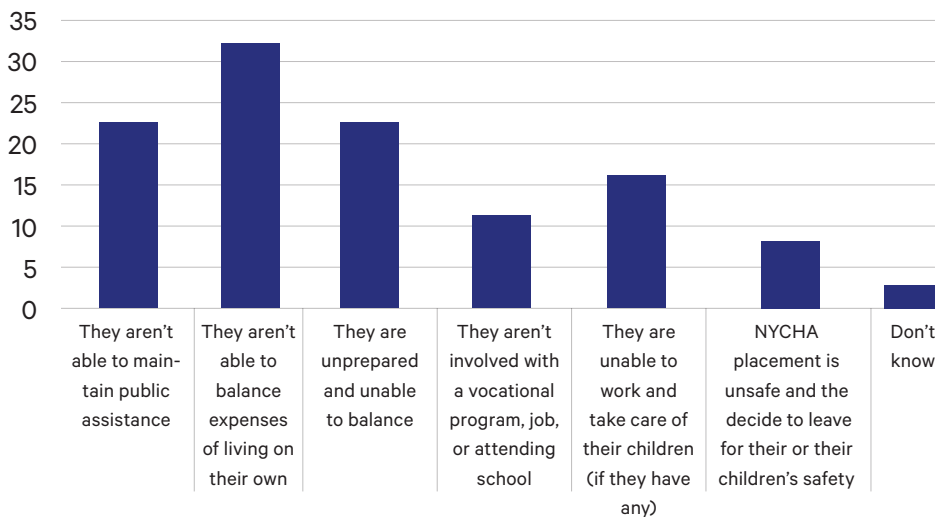
Response Count



*In the "other" category, respondents stated, "Many also left NYCHA or NY/NY III", and, "couch surfing is common; may be safe but this is not stable."

Why have former foster youth had to leave NYCHA housing? (Check all that apply) *Data based on responses from 40 case workers*

Response Count



*In the "other" category, respondents indicated, "evicted due to non-payment of rent", and that, "They are not compliant with public assistance mandates and therefore get sanctioned. They are also in rent arrears and unable to successfully navigate HRA, NYCHA and court systems on their own."



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: CURRENT AND FORMER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE SPEAK

While informative, the facts as presented above sometimes fail to fully capture the actual experience of navigating the foster care system and the aging out process for youth. Therefore, it was of great importance to FPWA that we get feedback straight from the source that this report seeks to aid: youth in foster care. Through a series of focus groups and interviews, FPWA tapped into current and former youth in foster care to provide information on the current state of the system and how it can be improved to provide better outcomes for youth that age out of care, especially in the area of housing.

For this report, FPWA held five focus groups between June and July 2013 with approximately 65 youth currently in New York City's foster care system. Two of the youth in foster care focus groups were held by Lawyers for Children, and one each was held with youth in foster care being served by New York Foundling, You Gotta Believe!, and FECS. The youth were asked about issues concerning the foster care system and about the aging out process, specifically independent housing. They were also asked about independent living workshops, homelessness, the housing application process, and how agencies prepare them for aging out.

In October 2013, FPWA interviewed in-depth six former youth in foster care that had experienced homelessness once they had aged out of the foster care system. The interviews were conducted in various locations throughout New York City; including one at a homeless shelter, several at a supportive housing facility and by telephone. Former youth in foster care were referred from Jewish Board of Children and Family Services, Catholic Guardian Services and Leake and Watts Services, Inc. The youths' ages ranged from 21 to 33 years old. FPWA talked with the former youth in foster care regarding their current

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living situation, their education level, employment status and history as well as their experience within the foster care system. The youth were also questioned on their current relationship with the foster care system or their previous caseworkers.

Youth with Hopes and Dreams

As might be expected, in many ways, current and former foster care youth share a lot of the same hopes and aspirations to achieve positive goals, such as finishing college, like other young people their age. They also try to take the perspective that their experience in foster care could be transformative for a positive end, and they might help others like themselves in the future.

Youth in foster care and youth that have aged out are very similar to most teenagers and young adults trying to navigate their lives. Like all teens, foster care youth enjoy having fun, “I’m 19. I just want to enjoy my summer.” They are forming relationships and figuring out the right fit for them, “I’m 17, and my plan is to stay away from negative activity.” Some are in college, and others manage the difficult task of balancing college and work, “I’m a cashier at Papaya King on 86th.” 18 of the current youth in foster care that we spoke with indicated a desire to pursue a college degree in the future.

Although similar in many ways to their peers with the exception of their foster youth experience, some youth foresee drawing upon this experience, “I want



to work with kids who are going through the same thing as me so I can explain this stuff and tell them how it feels because we went through it so we know what they’re going through.”

Systemic Challenges

In the interviews with current youth in care and youth that have aged out, they often described finding themselves facing problems beyond their control, which they experienced on their own or in working with their caseworkers, but are really related to governance structures and processes. In this context, it seems that the most useful approach to take is to start by defining the problems expressed by the youth that the system needs to address.

Bureaucratic Hurdles and Lack of Coordination of City Services

Difficulties navigating housing application process. Although most of the youth had not aged out, they were almost all already working on housing applications, such as stating, “I’m 18 years old, I’m in the process of getting my apartment and all that through ACS.” Youth face delays and multiple hurdles. Their main concern was complications with the city bureaucratic process. A youth expressed frustration on the process, “We can’t sit here and mope and cry. In actuality, nothing is getting done.”

They often described finding themselves facing problems beyond their control, which they experienced on their own or in working with their caseworkers, but are really related to governance structures and processes.

15 current youth interviewed
attributed their inability to find
housing due to long waiting
lists and lack of available
housing options.

A different youth explained said that the eligibility and qualifying part of application processes often did not finish in the time, risking their chances of getting housing after aging out. A youth described, “Like a lot of us aren’t doing our housing apps until 20 years old which is then 6 months to wait to get your interview and then after that another 6 months to wait for the apartment so at that point you’re already 21 and you have nowhere to go at this point. It’s like the process is not really being paid attention to and it’s taking too long.”

Another youth discussed the need to get information from different city agencies and keep track of what happened with the information that was submitted. Noting an unfortunate experience, one youth explained that, “they had me apply for it in 2009 and they told me they had to wait until I was 20 to put my application back in. In 2011, six months after my 21st birthday, I found out...I needed psychosocial-psychiatric evaluations updated to renew my New York New York III...So now I gotta start from the bottom.” Of course, some delays also have to do with the youth’s lack of commitment, fear, and ambivalence about their own future. Some youth believe they will be able to stay in a foster home after their 21st birthdays, but once payments stop are unable to. 23 youth interviewed described the challenges they faced working to submit the application, consider their housing options and their fear of aging out without a place to live.

Limited Housing Options

After housing applications are completed, many youth face long waits before finding housing. While

youth in foster care are supposed to receive priority in the housing process, often there is not enough housing for the youth who are aging out. If the housing application is delayed until the youth is 20 or 21 and the wait list takes over a year, the youth worried that they would age out without a place to live. One youth stated, “I’ve been on NYCHA’s waitlist for over a year now I’ve been on a lot of other New York New York III waiting lists for over a year now.” Another youth described how the lack of housing is affecting him, “I aged out too and the only reason they gave me an extension is because I do everything that I’m supposed to do. I go to school and I work, they just physically don’t have housing for me.” Youth worry about aging out without stable housing option, “I’ll be 21 in January. So I have to do...they’ve got supportive housing, they’ve got New York New York III. That’s what they told me, those are my three choices.”

Youth are also pessimistic that the ACS housing subsidy amount is sufficient to try to rent a private apartment. “When you are living in a studio apt, studios now go for like \$700 or \$800, when you’re living in a studio and you’re paying \$150 rent and when you lose your job then your rent even goes down, no one wants to move out of those apartments.” 15 current youth interviewed attributed their inability to find housing due to long waiting lists and lack of available housing options.

Lack of Permanency

After aging out, youth often have to manage their lives in the absence of adult relationships. While the goal is reunification, sometimes the trauma of separation and the length of stay in foster care is too long to develop a deep loving parent-child relationship. Some current foster youth shared not feeling a part of the family, “Basically, in my current foster home, before I ever had a talk with my foster mom, I basically felt like the dog they leave behind when they go outside. I had a talk with her and resolved everything. But many times, I’ve called her crying and been like why can’t I just have a family? A family who treats me like I’m their daughter, you know?”

Frequently, youth are perceived as difficult or impossible to place in a permanent family unit. Many times, this barrier is of the youth's own design. It is important to see past the protective measures older youth build to shield themselves from hurt and disappointment. One youth described, "Because a kid can say, 'I don't want love' and 'I don't care' and 'I don't want to be around you'. But when they graduating from high school and they got that one person in the crowd like, 'that's my baby!' it matters. It really does. And it really—when no one else is there, even when you do something bad, they'll say, 'I know what you did is bad, but we're gonna work on it. I'm not gonna give you back. We're gonna work on it and we're gonna talk about it.'"

Often the hurdles of upset are too great. After six years of foster care and aging out, one former foster care youth described his relationship upon being reunited with his mother as, "It's fine. We don't speak often. We're not close." Another youth after entering foster care at eight and being separated from his sister, aged out and was later reunited with his sister. He lived with his sister for a period but eventually that didn't work out. "I stayed with my older sister. She threw me out umm for some other reasons. She wanted to be with her boyfriend. She wanted me to leave so she threw my stuff out." Navigating foster care, aging out and housing is complex and requires maturity and forethought. This lack of permanency results in youth feeling like they need to do everything on their own and consequently sometimes making poor decisions or having few options. All of the six former foster youth described a lack of adult relationships in the lives.

Hard to Transition and Maintain Housing without Any Support

The institution: Living within a system. One former foster youth mentioned that a major reason that he struggled to maintain housing once he was released from the foster care system is because he had become "institutionalized." This is a major reason former foster care youth struggle so much with inde-

Four out of the six former foster youth that we interviewed told similar stories of returning to family following foster care and finding that it was not a stable or viable option for very long.

pendent living. He added that, "There are no foster care parents that actually care about their foster child's life. The foster care system itself is an institution...similar to being in jail...they take care of you and completely support you, and then they let you out. That is why people go back to jail because they want to be back in the institution [to be taken care of]."

After the structured environment of the foster care system, youth age out of the system and the transition often results in housing instability. After failing to find a stable living situation, most youth "couch surf" or move from place to place. They stay with friends, former foster parents and family members. Many youth and their families have unrealistic expectations about reunification. After being kept apart by ACS and the courts for a long time, many are anxious to be reunited, but probably for the same reasons that they were removed in the first place, things don't work out. Multiple youth relayed their stories of being separated from their siblings, put into uncomfortable foster situations that eventually turned abusive in some cases.

After transitioning between various friends' places, one youth stated, "A lot of people won't let me stay with them anymore...I mean if I had money I would help them...". The emotions and feelings the youth experience compound their problems. Youth attempt to reconnect with family, but often this does not work out. One youth shared, "I stayed with my older sister. She threw me out for some other reasons. She wanted to be with her boyfriend. She wanted me to

leave so she threw my stuff out. From there I stopped talking to her. That made me more angry. Very frustrated.” Four out of the six former foster youth that we interviewed told similar stories of returning to family following foster care and finding that it was not a stable or viable option for very long. They discussed examples of returning to parents, grandparents, siblings or extended family, as well as couch surfing with friends.

Without any real job or educational experience, stable housing can be difficult to keep up for former foster youth. Combining a lack of education, skill, and experience, youth enter an economy full of competition; many who have aged out of foster care are unable to secure employment, which affects their housing stability. At 23 years old, one youth described his only work experience, “The only experience I’ve ever had is three days working at a Boston Market...they let me go because there were too many people.” Other youth have the ability to find employment, but then often lose that job. With no back-up plan or family to catch them when they fall, youth end up not only unemployed, but homeless. One youth explained, “Every time I became homeless was after I lost a job.” However, he went on to say, “I am an adult, I’ve lost jobs based on me, but you have to know how to handle it.” Another common theme is the lack of education as they age out of care. Youth struggle with the reality of finding a job with no diploma or skills to aid them. One stated, “Question, at what grade did you leave school? Answer, 8, 8th grade.” All of the six former foster youth interviewed discussed the inability to maintain housing as a result of their lack of education and skills.

Former foster youth often leave the system struggling to maintain housing for more than just themselves. When youth in foster care have children, the daunting stress of finding housing, financially supporting their children and being a parent can be overwhelming. Youth in foster care often leave the system struggling to support more than just themselves. Youth raised in poverty and foster care

often have a hard time breaking the intergenerational cycle. One young adult interviewed entered foster care when he was three and has not had a stable residence since aging out. When we spoke to this 23-year-old male, he described his struggle seeing his own son in the foster care system, “I have a three year old son, he was born when I was living here....I don’t want him to have the life that I did”. Another interviewee will soon be a father, “One on the way...I don’t have a job, I’m at a bad place now...don’t know what will happen then.”

One young man described his feelings when he became a father at 19, and his current situation, “Yeah, my 3-year old son is in foster care.” He went on to discuss his realization this year that he had a son and that he needed to try and provide for him. However, he is currently homeless and unemployed. Until he can provide a healthy environment to raise his son, he will remain in the custody of the state.

This story is not uncommon as youth leave foster care with their own children to support. With few other choices, these youth seek housing within shelters that will accept families. While these shelters offer an alternative to general public shelters, they are not a permanent solution. Three of the former foster youth interviewed described the need to maintain housing for children, as well as themselves.

Lack of Aftercare Services

Former foster youth often lack social safety nets and have trouble accessing services. Structured services are often difficult for youth to access. A youth asserted that, “So I believe ACS in general [should have] had an overall better system for not only how they discharge residents but for how they follow up on them afterwards. I think they need a lot more after care possibilities because there’s slim to none.”

As a result, youth are often left isolated and without supports. One shared that, “I know that the services are available, but I don’t want to ask for help...When alumnus’s [sic] leave, they shouldn’t be coming back.” Most youth are under the impression that they are

I believe ACS in general [should have] had an overall better system for not only how they discharge residents but for how they follow up on them afterwards. I think they need a lot more after care possibilities because there's slim to none.

not able to seek help or guidance once they have aged out of the system. While youth who are not in the foster care system seek guidance and support from their parents and guardians long past the age of 21, youth in foster care are expected to be able to know how to be an adult upon leaving the system. A youth described, "I mean I do have people to talk to about my problems, I've never really felt like that...it's just that sometimes that people I talk to don't realize where I'm coming from, they'll sit there and tell me 'I've been there in your shoes'...no, you haven't." Four of the six former foster youth interviewed stated that they struggled to identify and access programs available to them. For those youth who used transitional and aftercare programs, they also noted that they were motivated and outspoken. They often pursued housing leads and applications over and over again until something came through.

Additionally, some noted how mental health issues exacerbated the problems after aging out. One youth recalled, "I remember my best friend—she was in a house with me—and she graduated from high school but ...she's bipolar and they said she's not stable... so she's just on the street. I try to help her but I can't really... If you have a mental problem they tell you that you can't stay by yourself so how are you supposed to get housing and how are you supposed to get a roommate that's stable enough to take care of us too. So what are you supposed to do? All they can do is age out and end up on the street. What are they supposed to do?"

Psychological and medical issues affect former foster youth's ability to procure housing, a job and maintain relationships. Youth often lack access to mental health services after aging out. Besides feelings of abandonment, foster children must deal with a legacy of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Often they require additional transitional services. One youth stated, "I have PTSD and I am borderline bipolar." He suffered from abuse by a foster parent at the age of six and has moved throughout the system ever since. One youth described that, "I'm not on medication anymore. When I was on, I was on for bipolar and schizophrenia. I was there for about eight months. And then to a state hospital for two weeks." Another aged out youth in foster care relayed his story, "When I was a kid, they sent me upstate to St. Agnus, labeled me emotionally disturbed..." He has since been unable to maintain healthy relationships with his family, retain employment, or maintain housing. Mental health and health issues was a concern for four of the former youth interviewed.

Quality of Customer Service for Youth

In addition to the frustrations that youth expressed which are systemic in nature, the youth in care also described a few problem areas related to their preparations for aging out and living on their own that they believed related to the customer services of their foster care agencies. Since all the foster care agencies interviewed for this report indicated that they were committed to delivering the highest quality customer service to youth in foster care, the section will provide the youth's perspective on problems followed by the foster care providers' perspective. In addition, the section includes a policy analysis as to whether

Psychological and medical issues affect former foster youth's ability to procure housing, a job and maintain relationships.

these problems are already mostly addressed by the current system or whether new policies and practices need to be considered.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE:

Problems with the independent living workshops offered by their foster care agencies. Many said they did not attend the workshops because the time or place was inconvenient, due to the distance from their home or jobs. Many others said the workshops were boring, repetitive, and did not provide useful knowledge on aging out. Only a few of those who attended the workshops considered them worthwhile. Some youth stated they did not attend because many of their peers were there for the money they received for attending and appeared uninterested or bored. Youth also reported that since the workshops run on six month cycles, they often do not attend or feel the workshops are a waste of time due to repetition. One youth explained, saying “They have these independent living workshops but basically people go just to get the money because like caseworkers and stuff don’t really go to my house and check on me or talk about independent living anyway so I have to do it myself. So I don’t feel like they’re really helping me. I feel like I’m doing it myself.” 11 of the youth that were interviewed spoke about the repetitiveness and lack of useful information that the workshops provided for them. They stated that more beneficial workshops to their futures would be about educating youth in financial management, how to open a bank account and how to do college applications.

Problems relating to their agency workers. A common theme was the perception that agency workers and social workers simply do not care about the youth. This youth perception often contradicts their caseworkers who view that they are maintaining a bond with youth after youth age out. Many youth felt that if they were not aware of everything going on, the workers would not do anything for them or even tell them what they needed to do. Many said the workers did not know their names, anything about

One caseworker stated that youth have a sense of entitlement and a general sense that they feel that they will get housing no matter what.

them and did not try to learn. Illustrating the level of disconnect, one youth recalled that their worker “only [visits] every three months and when she did come, it was only to get a write up for her supervisor. When she did come she never really gave me any information so I had to go up to the agency myself and get all the papers and stuff like that.” Many youth complained that their social workers would not come to see them unless something terrible happened or unless it was time to go to court. Most said that after aging out, the agencies did not care about what happened to the youth at all. One youth having explained: “If you’re not on them like you’re supposed to be they don’t care. We’re just a piece of paper to them.” Approximately half or thirty of the current youth mentioned the challenge of relating their caseworkers.

PROVIDERS PERSPECTIVE:

In regard to the independent skills workshops, foster care providers indicated that in spite of the wide availability of workshops, some of the young people resist these skills courses. Due to traumas experienced before being placed in foster care, youth come with issues that cause them to dispute or refuse to receive supports services from staff or to participate in programs that are available. As an example, one caseworker stated that youth have a “sense of entitlement and a general sense that they feel that they will get housing no matter what.” This caseworker “tries to stress to them that this is not the case and that housing is very limited.” The caseworker added that he is “constantly cajoling them” to do the things they need to do, like filling out applications, attending interviews, and life skills education.

As it relates to caseworker and youth relationships, caseworkers frequently take time to build relationships to overcome learning obstacles for youth in care. Often, it requires the caseworker to give attention to the personal issues facing the youth for them to be engaged. Another caseworker explained that from the newer staff to the veterans, she is constantly impressed by their patience and commitment to the youth in care. “They genuinely care about these young people and their babies.” She says that she always marvels at the passion and compassion the staff displays when teaching the youth. She adds that, “They never make the youth feel stupid or picked on. They explain the reasoning behind things...They take the time to make sure the youth understand.”

POLICY ANALYSIS

In reviewing these concerns raised by the youth and comparing them to responses from caseworkers and providers, it is important also to take them into consideration as it relates to the existing policies as mandated by the state and ACS. The state regulations in APPLA and ACS policies—from both the PYA plan and the lawsuit settlement—very clearly spell an extensive list of responsibilities for provider caseworkers to carry out with youth in care prior to their discharge. The challenge has been that providers often carry a heavy caseload and face various mandated demands that reduce their ability to spend as much time in helping youth preparing to age out of care. Recently, ACS has implemented a pilot model for youth in care, ChildsuccessNYC, which has as one of its goals to reduce caseloads for provider caseworkers to achieve better outcomes for youth. It is possible that effort could improve the effectiveness of caseworkers to build relationships with youth that are aging out of care.



BEST PRACTICES: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM DIFFERENT FOSTER CARE AGENCIES

Top Strategies from Successful Caseworkers:

- Assist youth to overcome mental health concerns
- Keep lines of communication open
- Prepare youth via work readiness training
- Find creative ways to overcome obstacles
- Display patience and respect for youth
- Talk about good job skills
- Encourage youth to think of life skills education as a job
- Instill a level of responsibility and commitment
- Let youth learn to do crisis management
- Build relationships with you that last beyond discharge

In addition to quantitative numbers that point to negative outcomes and persistent barriers, it is important to identify the best practices of foster care providers. Indeed, some agencies have developed innovative ways to work with youth aging out of care. FPWA conducted interviews with representatives from six provider agencies working with aging out youth on housing issues to identify these successful strategies. Interviews were conducted via phone October 8-23, 2013. Representatives interviewed included: Earl Whitted, Independent Living Specialist, Children's Village; Gilberto Marti, Housing Specialist, Tamika Attaway Flemming, Supervisor, and Cecilia Rutledge-Plummer, Director of Youth Development, all from SCO Family of Services; Valerie Worthy, Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA) Specialist, Inwood House; Aurora Anderson, PYA Specialist, Good Shepherd Services; Pilar Larancuent, PYA Specialist, Graham Windham; and Yusef Graves, PYA Supervisor, Abbott House.

Questions focused on programmatic and personal strategies employed by the agency and its rep-

resentatives, particular areas of strength, specific obstacles to housing and how they are addressed, and examples of past successes. Respondents highlighted areas where they felt their agencies did uniquely well, as well identified universal strategies. They emphasized the importance of preparing youth via work readiness, the need for aftercare, creative ways to overcome obstacles, and most importantly, the relationships built between agency staff and the youth they serve.

Worker Commitment and Continued Help

Possibly, the most crucial factor was worker commitment and their relationships with the youth. In most cases, this commitment extended past a youth's discharge and served as an example of workers going above and beyond for their youth. While the individuals interviewed for this report are not clinicians, they are key players in assisting youth to overcome mental health concerns and move into a productive adulthood. Of note, there does appear to be a disconnect between the perceptions of youth and caseworkers about the effectiveness of their relationships that probably needs to be addressed in practice.

Given the youths' mental health issues, predisposition to distrust of adults, and fear of attachments, which could be broken, adults seeking to build lasting roles in a youth's life must display great personal commitment and patience. They must go above and beyond their official roles on a regular basis, and

Given the youths' mental health issues, predisposition to distrust of adults, and fear of attachments, which could be broken, adults seeking to build lasting roles in a youth's life must display great personal commitment and patience.

keep the lines of communication open with the youth. The agency representatives interviewed for this report exemplified this commitment and are providing the necessary supports for youth to reach better outcomes in housing and beyond.

“Most kids are just not ready to be completely on their own at 21,” Pilar Larancuent at Graham Windham said. “You’ve been the most consistent person in their life for years. You don’t just shut that off. It’s the least we can do.”

Like all the workers we spoke with, Pilar’s clients come back for support and advice long after they have been discharged from the agency. Pilar had a former client recently who left care with a NYCHA apartment and employment secured. After a few months, he lost his job. Because of the relationship he had built with Pilar over the years, he reached out to her right away. She helped him through the process of applying for public assistance. He secured a new job shortly after, but in the meantime was able to keep his apartment. Pilar was under no obligation to help this young man since her agency’s contracted work had ended, but he trusted her and she did not let him down.

Aurora Anderson from Good Shepherd agrees that in the absence of funded aftercare, she and workers like her step up to fill the gap. She said that almost all of her clients come back at some point, whether it’s a fight with a boyfriend, financial problems or employment issues. She said she “gets scared about the ones who don’t come back.” Aurora added that: “It all comes down to relationships. There’s always going to be a flavor of the month in programming, but here we make an effort to always respect the youth.”

Valerie Worthy from Inwood House points to the compassion displayed by the staff at Inwood House as one of their most valuable tools. “They genuinely care about these young people and their babies,” she says. They display patience and respect in teaching the youth how to care for their children, taking the

time to explain the reasoning behind things and never making the youth feel stupid or picked on. This patience and compassion leads youth to come back to Inwood House staff for guidance long after discharge, she says, “I think that makes the world of difference. If we just cut them off at 21, would we really be doing our jobs?”

Work Readiness

One common strategy was the focus on work readiness with the youth. This is important because youth are often denied housing since they fail to meet employment and income requirements. Though youth may initially secure housing, many are unable to maintain it given their inability to hold a stable job.

Gilberto Marti at SCO Family of Services reports that the main barriers his clients face are income, employment and prior involvement with the criminal justice system. These factors are often interwoven. To help youth gain experience and skills, SCO Family of Services runs a internship program, where they place youth in various intern positions to help them gain experience and learn appropriate work place behavior.

At Inwood House, Valerie Worthy pairs her expertise with outside supports. In addition to running workshops on resume writing and interview skills, she works with Dress for Success to make sure her clients (parenting youth) have the appropriate attire for interviews and starting a new job. Valerie states, “Teaching these skills is not something we do just one time.” She follows up with her youth to make sure they maintain their employment and continue to advance.

One success story, Valerie shared, was about a young woman who entered the program with one child and another on the way. She felt that school was not for her and that she could not succeed. She and Valerie discussed alternatives, and the young woman enrolled in a janitorial career program. Once enrolled, Valerie kept in close contact with the girl. Part of the

requirement was that she does an internship. When the young lady was nervous about the interview, Valerie walked her through mock interviews. She secured an internship at a hospital. Valerie told the young lady, “The people that get hired are the people that go above and beyond.” They talked about good job skills like being on time and how to be a valuable employee. They dealt together with obstacles such as transportation. Following her internship, the young lady was hired at the hospital for a wage that could support her family. She has kept this job for some time.

Children’s Village uses a focused approach to highlight the importance of employment. Earl Whitted explained that their agency runs a separate ILS program for youth ages 18–21, which focuses solely on employment, education and housing. By running an intensive workshop for a targeted population, Earl says that the aim is that “they get the idea that they need to lock in with us.” For added practice, and to encourage attendance, Children’s Village encourages youth to think of their life skills education as a job. Like a job, a youths’ “pay” (agency allowance) is dependent on their attendance and commitment to the life skills workshops.

Independence

To conquer the scarce availability of NYCHA and NY/NYIIII apartments, Children’s Village thinks outside the box about resources available to their clients. They educate their clients on what it takes to secure and maintain market rate apartments. Earl Whitted stated that “ILS workers are not going to be held

Earl felt that youth “have a sense of entitlement” towards housing, and often fail to grasp the reality that many will not receive housing.

hostage by the process” of securing subsidized housing. He explained they need to be open to alternatives because of the high probability that that sub-sidized housing will not come through. Earl felt that youth “have a sense of entitlement” towards housing, and often fail to grasp the reality that many will not receive housing. Earl said he tries to break the mindset with his clients that NYCHA or NYIIII is a given and that outcomes are very dependent on the youths’ level of responsibility and commitment. At Good Shepherd, the staff tries to instill a similar mindset. They try to empower youth to be as independent as possible. Aurora Anderson stated that they encourage youth to “not depend on going from one system [child welfare] to another [supportive housing].” Their youth are educated on available supports, but made aware of the lack of housing availability.

To help youth better understand the housing situation and life on their own, Graham Windham hopes to start inviting back youth to speak at their workshops—youth that were successful at securing housing and youth that were less so. The hope is that these stories will motivate the youth that are still in foster care. While the foster parents will no longer receive financial support from ACS to care for the youth, the agency works with youth to secure public assistance so they can pay rent and remain in this stable, supported environment.

Along with educating the youth on services, agencies must instill confidence and a mindset to use the resources and knowledge they have received. This message was echoed by Pilar Larancuent at Graham

Along with educating the youth on services, agencies must instill confidence and a mindset to use the resources and knowledge they have received.

Windham, “The goal is to not let go of them, but guide them to do more on their own.” She explained that even in the process of securing housing, it is important to let the youth learn to do crisis management. For example, leading up to their interview process, she works with the youth on mock interviews, applications, and all the ins and outs of the process of securing housing. On the day of the interview, she sends them alone. If they get lost, she tells them to look at a map and try to figure it out on their own. They are only allowed to call her for help if they are still lost after 10–15 minutes of trying on their own. “There needs to be more of a gradual transition than being completely taken care of to completely on their own,” she says.

To help youth mentally prepare for adulthood, Aurora Anderson reported that Good Shepherd found success with encouraging youth to reach out to their families when safe and appropriate. While they may not be able to provide financial support, they can offer a great emotional lift. Aurora discussed a client who learned to advocate for herself. She is pursuing a career in nursing, working at a stable job and has been in a NYCHA apartment since March. Aurora says that a big factor in her success was her decision, encouraged by Aurora, to reach out to her family. She was surprised by the emotional support they offered, which helped reduce her feelings of loneliness.

Inwood House utilizes specialized programming to combat the financial illiteracy that makes maintaining housing a challenge for clients. They hold an annual Youth Summit for their youth and youth from other agencies. They invite guest speakers from banks and financial institutions to give a crash course on items like budgeting and opening bank accounts. In addition, financial education is a cornerstone of the programs at Inwood House, and they provide trainings throughout the year to ensure that their clients have a grasp on managing their money.

CONCLUSIONS

While the city has seen an overall decline in youth entering the foster care system, the largest percent of children in foster care remain over the age of 12. Next year, approximately 800–900 youth in New York City will age out of foster care on their 21st birthdays.

Both the agencies that work with youth in the process of aging out and the youth themselves identified similar barriers to successfully aging out. The survey of providers and others who work with youth aging out, echoed many of the complaints from youth in foster care. Youth are very often denied housing due to insufficient employment and incomes, and impeded by strict requirements put in place by housing programs. They are in need of greater transitional supports as they navigate the aging out process. Pregnant and parenting youth are often able to access the fewest housing supports, and are perhaps in the position of greatest need.

While there are numerous problems within the aging out process, agencies are making strong efforts to turn the tides. Committed workers are making a broad impact by stepping up to the challenge of providing ongoing guidance to aged out youth. These workers are working tirelessly to allow youth to become partners in their own independence. Programs like targeted life skills workshops, financial literacy seminars, and work readiness efforts are seeking to provide youth with the skills to avoid poverty and homelessness and to succeed as independent adults. These best practices help address concerns we heard from the youth focus groups as to the relevance of workshops, delays with the processing of housing applications and perceptions by some of their social workers' lack of care and commitment—which leaves them feeling isolated and hopeless.

If not addressed, the effects of these systemic flaws are evident in the years after youth age out. In speaking to youth who have aged out and experienced chronic homelessness, it is clear that they have definitive disadvantages in independent life. Most report ongoing trouble with familial and social relationships, inability to gain and hold employment, mental health struggles, and legal issues. These problems keep them stuck in a cycle of poverty and homelessness. For the significant portions who are parents themselves, it means their children also may come into care and have a greater chance that they too will experience this cycle.

Beyond policy changes, FPWA supports ACS and providers in recognizing that it is critical to shift practice and expectations in order to appreciate and realize the potential of each youth in care. The challenging part of improving housing stability for youth aging out of care is that ACS and providers seek to catapult these youth to stability that was not often present in their lives before the intervention of the foster care system to protect their safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research, provider surveys and youth focus groups conducted for this report, FPWA makes the following recommendations that the City, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and foster care agencies should take to improve housing outcomes for youth aging out of care and former youth in foster care.

For the City Administration and ACS

CREATE AN INTER-AGENCY TASK FORCE WITH POWER TO ADDRESS THE INTER-AGENCY ISSUES WITH YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

While agency cooperation and inter-agency task forces have been undertaken, they have not reached a level of effectiveness that addresses the ongoing concerns surrounding aging out youth and housing. An inter-agency task force would seek to improve coordination between ACS and related wider range of city agencies to ensure better services to youth aging out of foster care. Such an organizational centralization would be ripe for recognizing the circumstances and challenges for youth in foster care and streamlining the requirements for qualification to apply for services and assistance. The common refrain from provider agencies and youth in foster care is that city agencies function inefficiently in regard to housing and in regard to communication related to housing policies.

- To alleviate this systemic strain, Legal Aid Society, as well as several other groups, have proposed that a solution-driven, inter-agency task force be formed between ACS, DYCD, DOE, CUNY, DCAS, NYCHA, HRA, DOHMH, and DHS. In addition, this taskforce must also include community-level/ grassroots organizations and take stock of the existing services that they provide as well. This task force should come together to streamline the process of securing housing, ensure proper transition and supports for youth with mental health issues, and increase the accessibility of safe, permanent housing.⁷³

REDUCE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING HOUSING THROUGH NYCHA AND IMPROVE ITS COORDINATION WITH ACS

A key and crucial resource for youth aging out of care is the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), which provides affordable housing apartments once they reach independent living age. While NYCHA is a very important resource for youth aging out of care, there are many areas of its policies that are in dire need of improvement:

- Improve coordination between ACS and NYCHA to better inform service providers. Failure to coordinate with agencies affects the experiences of youth in foster care that may result in child welfare workers being unaware of new housing programs or resources that can benefit youth.⁷⁴
- Reduce eligibility requirements for receiving the presumptive budget letter. The problem is that the presumptive budget letter is only given to youth who are within 90 days of turning 21. The age limit on applying for the presumptive budget letter hinders the ability of the youth to secure housing. Youth in foster care should be able to apply earlier so they can get it approved in time to receive housing.
- Increase choices of NYCHA apartments for youth in foster care. By regulation, youth in foster care are only given two choices of where to live, and they face a tough choice making this decision knowing that they may forfeit an opportunity for NYCHA housing. Youth often reject apartments offered because the apartment takes the youth too far away from their neighborhoods and extended family members, or they perceive the conditions of the apartment to be filthy and unsafe, especially for children. If the youth rejects both the first and second offers, the application is considered "dead."

RESTORE, CREATE AND/OR INCREASE FUNDING FOR HOUSING PROGRAMS THAT AID BOTH YOUTH AGING OUT AND FORMER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Funding cuts over the past few years to crucial programs have reduced the ability of youth to attain affordable and sustainable housing after “aging out” of care. In addition, the already limited supply of public housing is shrinking and there is a tiny number of supportive housing units. Furthermore, only a limited number of these at-risk youth will earn enough on their own to rent an apartment with the city’s small housing subsidy, which is not sufficient and doesn’t nearly meet housing market rates. There are several ways to reverse this trend:

- Reinstitute automatic discharge grants up to \$750 per youth, and eliminate the need for approval of reimbursement process of expenses. Such grants paid for bedding, plates, silverware, and sheets; everything that is not furniture or rent. While providers can submit for reimbursement to ACS for purchases for youth for allowable expenses, the process should be automatic to encourage greater availability of funds for these moving costs for youth.
- Increase the ACS housing subsidy to reflect current rental rates for low-income housing, using City funds. Given the extremely low vacancy rate in New York City, Legal Aid Society has advocated that the subsidy is quite insufficient to meet the housing needs.⁷⁵
- Allow funding for flexible housing support. ACS should provide funding support to foster parents to house youth that age out who they already care for until 24 years of age. Housing support should not be contingent upon remaining in care.
- Increase funding for Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) services since they serve many former youth in foster care under 21. RHY includes Drop-in Centers, Crisis Shelters, Transitional Independent Living programs, and Street Outreach and Referral Services with the goal to protect runaway and homeless youth and reunite them with their families when appropriate.

Additionally, special services are made available to pregnant and parenting youth, those who have been sexually exploited, and LGBTQ youth.

- Create a new NY-NY IV agreement which will increase the supply of slots for supportive housing for homeless people including young adults aging out of care, especially pregnant and parenting teens.⁷⁶
- Increase the number of NY/NY III supportive housing units for all youth aging out of the foster care system and specifically for youth aging out of care that have children. As United to End Homelessness has noted, this can be done by supporting state efforts to have NY-NY III agreements get moving again and use Medicaid savings in supportive housing development and services.⁷⁷

BUILD UP AND EXTEND AFTERCARE TO YOUNG ADULTS AGED OUT OF CARE UP TO 25 YEARS OLD THROUGH THE PROVISION OF HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Much as most young people do in all of our communities, youth aged out of foster care typically continue to need supports, especially in the crucial first few years. Currently, the ACS lacks both funding allocation and clear guidelines for a support system for aged out youth. This leads to insufficient supervisory efforts not on par with much more needed investments such as family support and counseling.⁷⁸ There are several steps the City and ACS can take to alleviate this:

- Make efforts to create the infrastructure that is needed (guidelines, funding, etc.) for agencies to ensure that aged out youth can still access adequate assistance after leaving care and are allowed to “come back” to Aftercare as needed. Child Welfare Watch has suggested that these services include aid and support in finance, housing, counseling, employment and education.⁷⁹ The Empire State Coalition has recommended that ACS “develop funding and policy guidelines for Aftercare Specialists to provide

resources to youth for a minimum of two years after they leave care.”⁸⁰

- Collect and publicly release data on the outcomes of youth in foster care after discharge; i.e. focusing on the use of DHS and DYCD shelters by former youth in foster care after discharge. Center for an Urban Future has indicated that ACS collects data intended to ensure that youth in foster care are preparing for their transition to adulthood. However, “ACS officials acknowledge that they do not collect the most important information of all: data on youth in foster care outcomes in adulthood. In addition, the city should follow the lead of California, which leverages data on youth in foster care at the point of discharge far more effectively than New York City does. For example, California posts educational attainment of its youth in foster care on a quarterly basis.”⁸¹
- Create pathway to ensure youth have a consistent person that each can call on, a resource that he or she knows and trusts. Youth exiting the foster care system need a solid permanent relationship with a trusted, appropriate adult to help them navigate challenging life decisions. Although family finding is clearly a focus at ACS, it is evident from focus groups and discussions with older youth in care, that they are leaving care disconnected and without family supports.
- Intensify family finding efforts for youth with APPLA goals. While the impulse is to work towards independent adulthood with older youth in group home or residential treatment settings, they are still very much in need of familial supports. These youth often present a placement challenge, but the efforts to find them a permanent family should be redoubled. ChildSuccessNYC should develop specific, targeted strategies to better serve older youth in nontraditional foster care. Teaching these youth life skills is valuable, but often ineffective when not partnered with familial supports. The goal from the moment a child enters foster care, is to return them to a family, whether the one they

came from or a suitable, loving alternative. For youth aging out of care, this goal is vastly unmet.

For Foster Care Providers

IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF WORKSHOPS FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

- Focus group interviews conducted by FPWA with youth in foster care revealed helpful insight into some of the issues that persist in New York City’s foster care system. Based on the interviews, one notable aspect of this is the quality of some workshops given to youth to educate them on independent living. Overall problems of insufficient and repetitive lesson material were a common theme in many of the answers given for assessment of the program.
- Change up the workshops so that they are different each time and so that they teach actual skills that will be necessary for a 21 year old living on their own for the first time.
- Efforts should be made to ask youth what they feel would be useful to know, and ask those who have already aged out what they wish they knew so that the workshops can be tailored to the needs of a youth aging out. The overall goal of these steps is to make workshops more engaging so that everyone is interested and learn valuable information.
- Agencies should bring in successful aged out youth in foster care to teach some of the workshops, as they know first-hand which skills need to be taught in order to succeed after aging out.
- Youth who have already aged out probably have a list of topics that they think it would be important to know before aging out. Also, youth still in care may be more likely to pay attention to someone who has been through the same things that they have been through, rather than a staff person and may have never been in foster care.

TRAIN WORKERS MORE THOROUGHLY

- This could include empathy training for all workers, as well as more specialized trainings for those who will be working with different types of

youth such as mentally disabled youth, LGBTQ youth, or pregnant youth. Such an effort will strengthen relationships between youth and authority figures and hopefully make the foster care process easier on youth.

CREATE A FORMAL PROCESS TO INCORPORATE FEEDBACK FROM YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

- Attain feedback from youth on workshops, workers, and various things going on in the agency, group home, or foster home. Youth have valuable and unique insight about the inner workings of the system, and could really help reform the foster care system in the areas that need help. It is important to consider their feedback on the same level as feedback from adults.

MAKE FAMILY CONNECTIONS AND PERMANENCY EFFORTS A KEY ASPECT OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES.

- While concrete skills are vital to youth aging out of care, without permanent, adult supports youth are often set up for failure. PYA and ILS workers should make helping youth connect to these vital emotional support resources an emphasized piece of their curriculum for all youth.

Best Practices for Foster Care Agencies

FACILITATE LASTING RELATIONSHIPS AND WORKER COMMITMENT

- The one best practice common to every agency representative interviewed was the importance and lasting impact of worker/client relationships. Trainings should be targeted to encourage and enhance these bonds. This commitment is an important tool in prompting youth to complete tasks and succeed in interviews on the path to securing housing. Once placed in housing it has been shown that youth will turn to these trusted adults for guidance, which can prevent them from losing housing after they have aged out.

CREATE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

- In order to address a lack of employment experience and skills, agencies are utilizing and creating internship programs. This will help youth going forward to secure paid employment and maintain stable housing.

TARGET LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

- A common complaint amongst youth in foster care is that life skills workshops are not applicable to them. Children's Village's practice of a specialized workshop for older youth targets the population that needs guidance most urgently with only the most important information. The workshops focus exclusively on issues surrounding employment, education and housing. These issues are the most pressing and clearly inter-related for aging out youth.

IMPLEMENT MONEY MANAGEMENT TRAINING

- Former youth in foster care are far more likely to get evicted than their peers. Providers have found it helpful to create a system where youth are responsible for managing their stipend, expenses, and budgeting. Once on their own, youth often have difficulty managing their finances, accounting for an extremely high eviction rate. Of course, this money management training needs to be done in a way that is relative to the youth, their background and their culture.
- Inwood House utilizes specialized programming to combat the financial illiteracy that makes maintaining housing a challenge for clients. They hold an annual Youth Summit for their youth and youth from other agencies. They invite guest speakers from banks and financial institutions to give a crash course on items like budgeting and opening bank accounts. Financial education is a cornerstone of the programs at Inwood House, ensuring that clients have a grasp on managing their money.

UTILIZE FATHER ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

- A program unique to Inwood House is its work with the young mother population. As part of this effort, they seek to engage the young fathers (to be an active part of the family unit when safe and appropriate). This relieves some of the burden from the young mother, and allows the parents to share responsibility and work together to problem solve. Young parents face even more barriers in regard to obtaining stable housing, so added supports are badly needed.

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FPWA is a membership organization with a network of human service organizations and churches that operate over 1,200 programs throughout the New York City metro area. Together, we serve over 1.5 million low-income New Yorkers of all ages, ethnicities and faiths each year.

This report was written by Noah Franklin, Senior Policy Analyst for Child Welfare and Workforce Development, and our interns—Judith Athelstanlowe, Chirag Bhatt, Kaysey Grard, Michelle Greenblatt, Aiyanna Isom, Jessica Infante, Kara Ann Noesner, Mallory Nugent and Rachel Rabinowitz—and edited by Bich Ha Pham, Director of Policy, Advocacy and Research and Wayne Ho, Chief Program and Policy Officer at FPWA.

This report benefited from the help, insights and expert knowledge of many people. We would like to thank FECS, Lawyers for Children, New York Foundling, and You Gotta Believe! for arranging focus groups for us with youth aging out of care that they are currently serving in their programs. Additionally, we would like to thank the Jewish Board of Children and Family Services' Kaplan House, Catholic Guardian Services and Leake and Watts Services, Inc. for helping us to connect to and hold interviews with young adults who have already aged out of the foster care system. Furthermore, we greatly appreciated the fifty workers from child welfare, legal representation, social work, advocacy, workforce and adoption organizations who took part in our anonymous survey to document the perspective of the individuals and agencies that work with youth aging out of care on a daily basis. We would also like to thank staff at Abbott House, Children's Village, Good Shepherd Services, Graham Windham, Inwood House and SCO Family of Services for taking time to meet with us and discuss their innovative best practices in working with youth aging out of care. Importantly, we are grateful too for the frank feedback and personal anecdotes from the members of FPWA's Youth Aging Out of Care Workgroup and its Leadership Committee.

Finally, we are particularly grateful for the assistance of the following individuals for reviewing and providing feedback on our draft report: Elizabeth Calvin, Human Rights Watch; Jess Danhauser, Graham Windham; Ronni Fuchs, New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS); Danielle Gaffney-Kryger, Children's Village; Elizabeth Garcia, Chelsea Foyer/Edwin Gould, Good Shepherd; Stephanie Gendell, Citizen's Committee for Children; Tom Hillard, Center for an Urban Future; Edline Jacquet, Supportive Housing Network; Betsy Kramer, Lawyers for Children; Sharon McDonald, National Alliance to End Homelessness; and Lorraine Stephens, Catholic Guardian Services.

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