



Success Beyond 18: Helping Connecticut's Youth in Foster Care Transition to Adulthood

While an 18th birthday traditionally marks the onset of the age of majority, for most young people, transitioning from adolescence to adulthood is a gradual process, guided by support from parents and peers. However, for young people who grow up in foster care and for whom the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) is responsible, the transition to adulthood can be sudden and painful. Many of these young people don't have long-term, stable relationships with parents or mentors who can help them learn how to take on adult responsibilities. Instead, the State of Connecticut is their legal guardian. When these children turn 18 and the State's legal responsibility for them ends, many struggle with their sudden independence and loss of support.

A growing body of national research suggests that these children who "age out" of the foster care system face a myriad of problems. By their mid-twenties, these children are less likely to have a high school diploma, more likely to be unemployed, more likely to become homeless, and less likely to have health insurance. Young women in this population are more likely to have experienced an unplanned pregnancy.

Until 2008, federal financial support to states caring for children in foster care ended at age 18. If states wanted to support this population into their late teens and early twenties, states were on the hook for the whole bill to help these young adults obtain housing, find a job, or pursue postsecondary education. However, in 2008, in recognition of the challenges that young people who age out of foster care face, Congress and President Bush signed into law the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections). Among other things, this law offered federal financial support to states that extend foster care to eligible youth until their twenty-first birthdays. Youth are eligible if they are in high school, working at least 80 hours a month, enrolled in a postsecondary school such as a college or vocational education program, enrolled in any program that promotes or removes barriers to employment, or incapable of doing any of these things due to a medical condition.

In the wake of Fostering Connections, states around the country have begun to expand their foster care systems in an attempt to serve older youth during this transition period to early adulthood. Currently, Connecticut allows youth enrolled in a post-secondary education program to remain with DCF after they turn 18. For these youth, Connecticut provides tuition assistance and a variety of independent living options. However, Connecticut does not serve all youth who are eligible to remain in foster care under Fostering Connections. Furthermore, Connecticut does not receive any federal financial support for the services that it already offers to 18 to 21 year-olds, because it does not provide all the components of extended foster care required by Fostering Connections, including some equivalent of court supervision and case review.

With the passage of Fostering Connections, Connecticut has an opportunity to join a national movement and expand its foster care to youth until their twenty-first birthdays. However, extending foster care to age 21 will do little good if this extended care leaves youth no more prepared for independence than they would have been at 18. Rather, it is essential that Connecticut ensure that its foster care for adolescents and young adults is age appropriate, and allows these older youth to take on increasing responsibility so as to help them transition smoothly to adulthood.

This conference is a forum for advocates, policy makers, and youth to come together and explore what Connecticut can do to help its most vulnerable young people transition smoothly and successfully to adulthood.