CONNECTICUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN

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RISING OUT OF RECESSION

HOW CONNECTICUT CAN SUPPORT YOUNG ADULTS TRANSITIONING OUT OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN CHALLENGING ECONOMIC TIMES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Young people face immense barriers during economic recessions, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people aging out of foster care and older youth in foster care during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic face the dual challenges of being in State care and experiencing an economic catastrophe. These compounding challenges could negatively impact the life trajectories of youth. Still, strategic policies and targeted programs can help youth aging out of care gain stability during these challenging times.

Youth and young adult unemployment are disproportionately sensitive to changes in business-cycle conditions.[1] An estimate from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that youth and young adult unemployment rates change by about 1.79 percent for every one percent change in adult rates.[2] Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Connecticut's young adults (18-24) were the second age cohort most likely to report being unemployed, only coming in behind adults over 65.[3] During a typical economic recession, many young people return to school to build their human capital instead of full-time pursuing employment.[4] Unlike past recessions, COVID-19 caused college campuses to shut down. In Connecticut, young people became *less* likely to pursue higher education due to the COVID-19 recession. Loss of employment combined with school closures has left millions of young people across the country in situations of housing insecurity. During the fall of 2020, approximately one in seven young people living in single adult renting households reported being behind on rent.[5] The increase in housing insecurity has forced millions of young people to move in with their parents or grandparents, of which 80 percent are between ages 18 and 25.[6]

Young adults transitioning out of foster care have even greater obstacles to building independent careers and living situations. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic compounds these obstacles. The University of Pennsylvania's Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice, and Research surveyed young people in care and young people who recently aged out of care in July of 2020; the findings were disheartening.[7] Across 32 states, 72 percent of youth surveyed reported that they only had enough money to cover one month's expenses. Forty-eight percent reported being laid off or having unreliable work hours because of the pandemic. Twenty-one percent of youth said they were in a state of financial crisis. Fifty-five percent reported food insecurity. Forty-three percent reported that they had to leave their living situation or feared that they would soon have to go. Seven percent were couch surfing or homeless.

This report examines the obstacles in employment, education, and housing faced by young adults transitioning out of the child welfare system; the supports made available to help them achieve independent living; gaps that exist and that have been potentially exacerbated by the current pandemic; and model policies and programs from other states. We also provide recommendations on how Connecticut policymakers can support transition-age youth in foster care and former foster youth to live securely and independently.

In April 2020, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) issued a moratorium on youth aging out of care during the pandemic. This means that young people who otherwise would need to transition to care under another agency, young people who were no longer age-eligible for services, and young people who were not actively participating in DCF's employment or education programming were able to stay in care and receive case management and services during this time. As a result of the moratorium, the number of young adults over 19 in DCF care doubled between March 2020 and September 2021. The moratorium ended on September 30, 2021. At this time, a total of 215 young people transitioned out of care.[8]

Following the pandemic-induced lockdown, youth and young adults in DCF care showed an initial drop in employment in the first six months of the pandemic. Only 33 percent of previously employed youth ages 16 and 17 remained employed between April 2020 and September 2020, and 44 percent of previously employed young adults remained employed during that time. However, once businesses began reopening to the public, DCF youth employment rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels. DCF young adult employment grew by 45 percent. In particular, full-time employment among DCF-involved young adults more than doubled.

High school diploma attainment grew by six percent for 18- and 19-year olds in DCF care during the pandemic. High school diploma attainment fell by three percent for young adults age 20 and over. Because the number of young adults in care grew significantly during this time, it is possible that the number of young adults completing their high school education did not decrease even though the percentage decreased.

Stable housing is critical for rising young adults to progress their education [9]and employment.[10] As of January 2021, 30 percent of young people expected to age out of DCF care within six months did not have stable housing plans.[11] DCF updated the policies and practices guiding youth and young adult transition out of care and launched their new model, V.I.T.A.L., in August of 2022. These new policies and practices include a focus on helping young people transitioning out of care create stable housing plans and assisting young people who find themselves in unstable housing situations. Since May 2021, DCF reported providing a total of $23,980.99 in emergency funds for 25 youth ranging from 18 to 26 years old. Young people used these funds for a combination of utility bill assistance, rental assistance, security deposits, purchasing groceries, and homelessness prevention efforts such as hotel stays, buying weather-appropriate clothing, and purchasing furniture.

Additionally, DCF sought to support former foster youth seeking assistance during the pandemic by expanding the START program at The Connection Inc. The START program provides emergency housing, rental assistance, and intensive support services for homeless young people. DCF referred a total of 23 former foster youth for services. In addition, The Connection, Inc. received 30 requests for housing services for young people found to qualify for the START expansion due to their history in foster care. In total, 53 young people received support through the START expansion. Fifty-five percent of the young people requested one-time assistance with expenses. The rest have continued involvement and case management services.[12]

These data suggest that while staying in DCF care past 18 may not be preferable to all young people, extended access to supports and services benefits those who choose to remain in care. Our report provides an in-depth review of DCF's updated policies and programs to assist young people preparing to launch into independent living.

Young people who choose to leave DCF care without completing higher education or vocational training tend to be among Connecticut's youth most vulnerable to poor outcomes. Programs and services offered by other State agencies are just as crucial as DCF programs to assist young people in their transitions. DCF partners with many other agencies, including the Department of Housing (DOH), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), the State Department of Education (CSDE), the Office of Higher

Education, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS), and others to provide appropriate, high-quality services for young with State system involvement.

This report additionally reviews programs and services provided by other Connecticut State agencies pertaining to employment, education, and housing. Some of Connecticut's State agencies have programs directly targeted to address the need of young people who carry a lot of trauma and have few family connections. Still, not all Connecticut's departments are adequately equipped to serve young people with State systems involvement. Even departments with specialized services, such as DOH and DOL, are restricted in what they can provide due to tight funding and inadequate data about young people needing assistance. Connecticut should use this moment of a historically flush budget reserve funds and the influx of COVID recovery dollars from the federal government to strengthen the ways agencies outside of DCF support young people with systems involvement.

The report provides six high-level policy recommendations to better support young people in Connecticut who have transitioned out of DCF care. Each proposal includes a series of "good," "better," and "best" options that policymakers can consider contingent upon funding and political will.

1) CONNECTICUT SHOULD HAVE DEDICATED LIAISONS FOR SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUNG PEOPLE IN DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES RELEVANT TO YOUNG ADULT STABILITY, HEALTH, AND SECURITY. THE CONNECTICUT GENERAL ASSEMBLY (CGA) SHOULD PROVIDE FUNDING FOR THE CREATION AND STAFFING OF THESE POSITIONS.

- **GOOD POLICY:** State departments that do not currently have staff or divisions specializing in the needs of systems involved youth should have dedicated liaisons that understand the circumstances of young adults who are leaving or have left foster care, homelessness, and the criminal legal system; can personally connect with struggling young people; can help young people access the resources and means to achieve success and stability; and can help young people with State system involvement develop strong housing planning skills.
- **BETTER POLICY:** State departments should hire people who experienced State system involvement. Further recruiting young people with lived experience will help decrease employment barriers for some young people with system involvement.
- **BEST POLICY:** Many State departments provide funding to community-based nonprofit agencies, and these agencies directly serve young people. Regional providers of essential services should also hire system-involved youth liaisons.

2) CONNECTICUT'S STATE DEPARTMENTS SHOULD CREATE PRIORITY HIRING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT.

- **GOOD POLICY:** The State should create a policy that gives hiring preference to current and former foster youth qualified for State government jobs. This is a natural progression of Conn. Gen Statute §4-61oo, which provides current and former foster youth preferential hiring for internship opportunities at State agencies.
- **BETTER POLICY:** State departments should prioritize hiring current and former foster youth for entry-level positions, particularly positions that do not require a college degree.
- **BEST POLICY:** Departments at the county and municipal levels should also create priority hiring mechanisms for young people with State system involvement.

3) CONNECTICUT SHOULD EXTEND ITS HIGHER EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING TUITION AND FEE EXEMPTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE LEFT DCF CARE. THE CGA SHOULD PROVIDE FUNDING FOR THIS EXTENSION.

- **GOOD POLICY:** Connecticut should extend its vocational and higher education State Tuition Waivers to formerly DCF-involved young people up to age 30. This extension will help young people who have not finished their undergraduate or vocational training. It will also make graduate and professional school accessible to young people who may not have family support.
- **BETTER POLICY:** Connecticut should provide a subsidy for fees, books, and living expenses for young people who have transitioned out of care but are still enrolled in vocational training or higher education. This subsidy could be modeled off federal Education Training Vouchers (ETVs) and offered to young people up to age 30.
- **BEST POLICY:** To help disrupt cyclical poverty, Connecticut should provide State Tuition Waivers and State-level ETVs to formerly DCF-involved people regardless of age.

4) CONNECTICUT SHOULD CREATE A SYSTEM TO DATA MATCH YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE A HISTORY OF SYSTEMS INVOLVEMENT ACROSS SYSTEMS AND AN ADVISORY COUNCIL TO ADVISE ON POLICIES TO FILL GAPS IN YOUNG PEOPLE ACCESSING SERVICES.

- **GOOD POLICY:** The Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) could require agencies to partner in data matching regularly and report findings.
- **BETTER POLICY:** Agencies and policymakers could analyze more holistic data by creating a social security matching system for young people with State system involvement. To protect young people's rights, the State must obtain informed consent from young people when they exit State care and ensure that young people understand how data are secured and used.
- **BEST POLICY:** The State should create and staff an advisory council responsible for advising policymakers on the needs of vulnerable young adults in Connecticut. This council could offer recommendations on how Connecticut could target services and programs to specific groups of young people to improve young people's outcomes and service efficiency.

5) CONNECTICUT SHOULD EXTEND THE AGE AT WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE MAY AGE OUT OF DCF CARE.

- **GOOD POLICY:** The CGA should amend the State statute to codify DCF's current practice of allowing qualified young people to remain in care up to age 23.
- **BETTER POLICY:** Connecticut should extend care to all categories eligible under the Fostering Connections Act, including young adults working at least 80 hours a month and young adults who are too impaired to accomplish the educational, vocational, or work requirements to stay in DCF care (but are not eligible to transfer to DDS or DMHAS).
- **BEST POLICY:** Connecticut should allow young adults to stay in care up to age 26 to align with current scientific research regarding youth and young adult neurodevelopment.

6) THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD MAKE PANDEMIC-RELATED CHANGES TO THE JOHN H. CHAFEE FOSTER CARE PROGRAM FOR SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD PERMANENT.

- **GOOD POLICY:** Federal policymakers should make Chafee flexibility provisions created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic permanent. These provisions include increasing the funds States can use on housing, allowing young people to use ETVs for more expenses, and allowing States to provide ETVs to young people up to age 27.
- **BETTER POLICY:** Federal policymakers should index the yearly Chafee appropriation and state contributions by inflation. Base Chafee funds have been stuck around $140 million since 1999. If Chafee and ETV funding kept up with inflation, the current appropriation would be $327 million each year.
- **BEST POLICY:** Policymakers increased Chafee funds to $400 million during the pandemic. They should make this appropriation permanent and index it to inflation moving forward. This would help ensure that more eligible youth can access funds and services.

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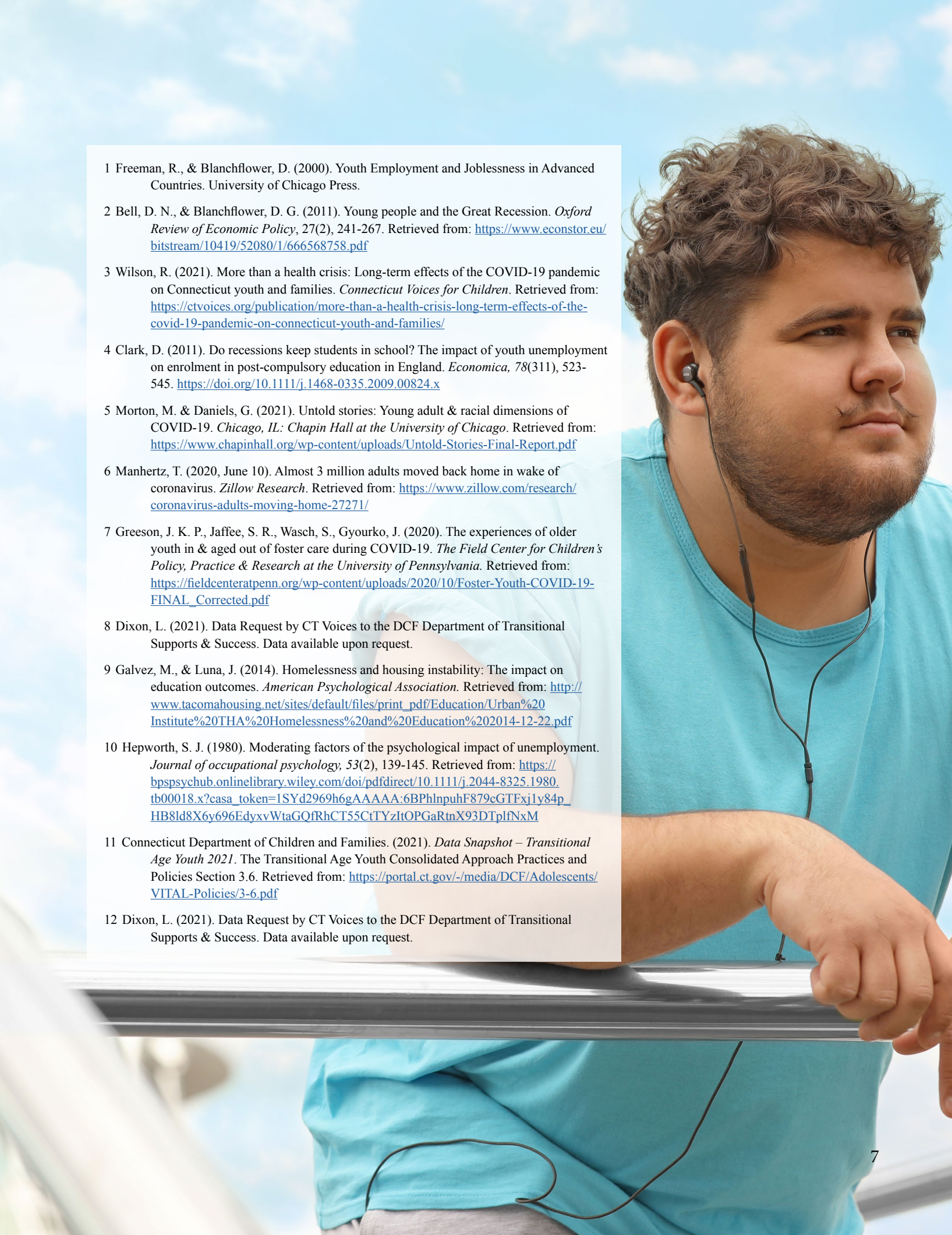
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