

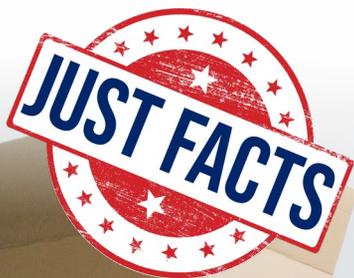
CONNECTICUT  
**VOICES**  
FOR CHILDREN

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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



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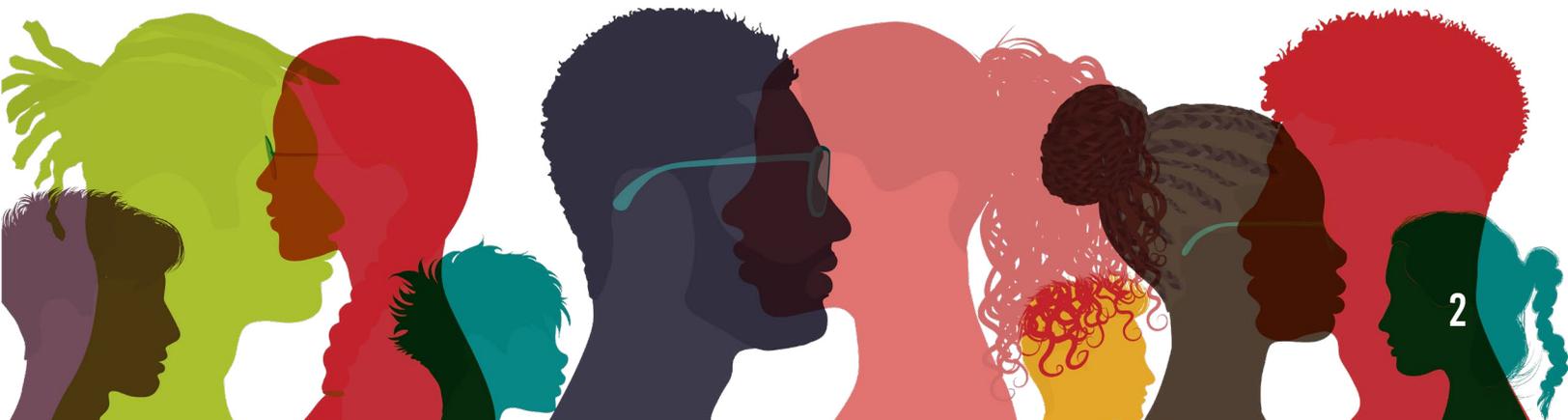
Young people face immense barriers during economic recessions, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people aging out of foster care and older youth in foster care during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic face the dual challenges of being in State care and experiencing an economic catastrophe. These compounding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

Youth in foster care throughout the U.S. struggled to maintain stability throughout the pandemic. The University of Pennsylvania's Field Center for Children's Policy found that across 32 states, many young adults in foster care lost employment, did not have enough to cover more than one month's expenses, were food insecure, and were facing housing instability. In January 2021, 30 percent of young adults in Connecticut's Department of Children and Families expected to age out within six months did not have stable housing plans.

While many states, Connecticut included, have had programs and mandates in place to help youth in care achieve stability in their housing, employment, and education, COVID-19's impact on Connecticut and the U.S. is unprecedented in modern memory. To alleviate the burden and barriers the pandemic has placed on youth in care, states have had to combine existing policy and practices with creative attempts at supporting youth in times that make transitioning unstable. For example, in April 2020 DCF issued a moratorium on youth aging out of care and allowed young adults under the age of 23 to reenter care, preventing young adults from losing access to case management services and resources that could prove vital during unstable times.

DCF saw several changes occur in its young adult population during the COVID-19 pandemic and its moratorium:

- Throughout the pandemic, the number of young adults over the age of 19 in DCF care increased by 31 percent.
- While part-time employment for youth ages 16 and 17 fell in the first year of the pandemic, it has begun to recover to near pre-pandemic levels.
- While part-time and full-time employment for young adults over the age of 18 both fell in the first months of the pandemic, part-time employment increased by 23 percent between fall of 2019 and fall of 2021, and full-time employment more than doubled during that same period.
- High school diploma attainment for young adults ages 18 and 19 was higher in the fall of 2021 than in the months before the pandemic.



- High school diploma attainment for young adults over the age of 20 increased slightly in the early months of the pandemic, but ultimately fell slightly below pre-pandemic levels.
- DCF referred 23 former foster youth to the START program at The Connection Inc., an organization that serves homeless young people ages 16-24. The young adults were referred for emergency housing services, rental assistance services, and intensive support services. The Connection Inc. received an additional 30 requests for housing services for young adults who were previously in foster care, making a total of 53 young adults who received support through the START program.

For the young adults who would have aged out during the moratorium, and the many who have aged out since the moratorium ended, the need for resources and supports to reach stability and independence still exists. After all, when young people enter the foster care system, the State becomes their legal guardian. In Connecticut, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) is the primary child-serving agency, but considering it the entire child-serving system does a disservice to young people transitioning into adulthood. To help ensure the well-being and prosperity of the young adults who grow up in the care of the State of Connecticut, policymakers, agencies, and community service providers in Connecticut must act intentionally and collaboratively to provide young people with State systems involvement with what they need to be successful. Supporting the stability of these young people will help them have more fruitful lives, will grow the economy, and will make Connecticut a more racially just place to live and grow.

Connecticut policymakers and State departments should ensure the well-being and access to opportunity for all youth and young adults, especially those under State care. To help achieve that goal, our report makes several policy recommendations. While the recommendations listed below are broad, the report further breaks down each one with actionable steps and implementation options that Connecticut policymakers can take. To ensure that youth transitioning out of state care can lead rich, stable, and independently sound lives, even when they no longer qualify for services through DCF:

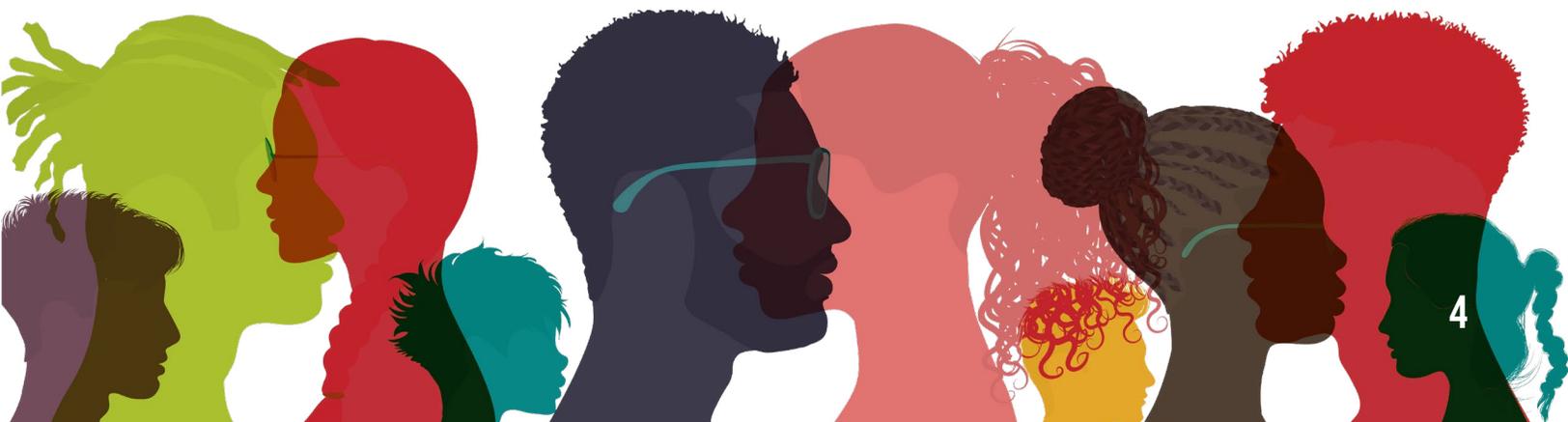
**Connecticut should have dedicated liaisons for young people in foster care/ former young people in care in departments and agencies relevant to young adult stability, health, and security.** As young adults age out of care and into independent living, State departments outside of DCF may provide necessary resources such as healthcare, housing, and employment guidance. Navigating State departments is a daunting and sometimes lengthy task, and much of it is learned through simple trial and error. Additionally, many of these young people have experienced multiple traumas, and the confusion and complications of transitioning can be compounded by a lack of adult supports to help them navigate the necessary changes.



**Connecticut policymakers should create priority hiring for former young people in foster care.** Compared to their peers, former young people in foster care are less likely to succeed in their transition into the workforce, greatly hindering their ability to successfully transition to independent living. Young people who age out of foster care and do secure work earn, on average, less than young people in the general population. As young adults under the care of the State, Connecticut should find ways to provide greater access to well-paying, stable, professional work through the use of its multiple State departments, thus increasing the social capital of young people with child welfare system involvement. Connecticut Gen. Statute §4-6100 establishes that current and former foster youth are given preferential hiring for internship opportunities at State agencies. Expanding preferential hiring to government jobs to qualified young people is a natural extension of preexisting law.

**Connecticut should extend its college tuition and fee exemption for former foster youth.** The idea that post-secondary education is a four-year journey isn't always true. Only 45 percent of degree-seekers at their first institution graduate within four years. For Black and Hispanic students, this number sits at 25 percent and 35 percent respectively. Only 60 percent of students graduate within five years, and only 62 percent graduate within six years. At the same time, the amount of people seeking professional degrees has continued to rise, creating added pressure for individuals to continue their education. Without access to family wealth, young adults leaving care may have to balance working to pay for their education, schoolwork, and other potential costs like child-raising, making achieving success in their education extremely difficult. With the cost of college continuing to rise, and the average debt of a graduate degree about double that of a bachelor's degree, young adults exiting care and hoping to use a postsecondary degree as a road to stable employment will need additional support past the age of 23.

**Connecticut should create a system to data match young people who have a history of systems-involvement across systems and services and an advisory council to analyze these data, identify gaps in services for transition-age young people with system involvement, and advise on policies that can fill these gaps.** While youth are within the care of the Department of Children and Families, DCF can connect their young people with services and keep track of what they are receiving, but finding out what former young people in care need and what they are accessing once they leave care can be more difficult. Many of these young people come into contact with other State systems, and many of these young people access services through other State departments such as the Department of Labor, Department of Housing, and Department of Social Services.



Currently, there is no statewide, systemic method for tracking whether the individuals accessing adult services had DCF involvement. Each agency separately collecting data creates a challenge to maximizing financial resources and developing targeted wraparound interventions for system-involved young people. It is also important that such a system protects the rights of young people by obtaining informed consent from young people when they exit State care and ensuring that young people understand how data are secured and used.

**Connecticut should extend the age at which young people may age out of DCF care.** The shift from adolescence to adulthood is not as seamless as reaching a certain age. Policymakers often mark the transition into adulthood by arbitrary events and accomplishments, such as turning 18 or graduating from school, but the science of brain development tells us that the picture of what an adult looks like is not so clear-cut. Many young adults' brains do not reach maturity until their mid to late 20s. Additionally, traditional milestones of "adulthood" and independence are being pushed back for all young adults. As previously mentioned, during the pandemic DCF's moratorium on aging out of care resulted in an increase of young adults opting to stay in care and an increase in full-time employment for young adults. Young adults need support beyond the age markers the State has set for them.

**The Federal Government should make pandemic-related changes to Chafee program policies and funding permanent.** The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, created in 1999, provides funding and programming to help transition-age young people with education, employment, financial management, housing, and building connections to caring adults who can assist young people after they leave State care. Before the pandemic, Chafee funds remained around \$140 million each year. Education Training Voucher (ETV) funds provided up to \$60 million more, but these funds were discretionary. Both funding amounts proved inadequate for the number of young people in care nationally and the array of supports they need. During the pandemic, federal policymakers tripled their investment in Chafee funding. They also increased the 30 percent funding limit that states could use toward housing, extended the age of eligibility for Chafee services and funds until age 27, and built flexibility into ETV funds so young people could spend money on things that support them remaining enrolled in higher education. Making this amount of funding permanent would help states stabilize young people when the next economic crisis hits.

