

## **Improving Outcomes for Youth Transitioning from Foster Care to Adulthood: An Innovative Model and Recommendations for Funding**

**Rosaleen Holohan and Dawn Mott**

### **Abstract**

Transitioning to adulthood is a daunting challenge for young people and can be a frightening time for young adults exiting the foster care system. Short and long-term outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care are substandard when compared with all youth. These poor outcomes translate into unstable employment and increased use of public benefits. Housing instability has been identified as one of the major barriers to improving outcomes for this population. Extending services beyond the age of 18, when youth typically exit foster care, is a critically important strategy for improving these outcomes. While many states have extended foster care services, funding streams are not set up to offer all the supports needed, including housing supports. To address this problem, Tabor Children's Services has developed an innovative program model that improves supports for young adults and recommendations for using existing federal funding to promote housing stability.

### **The Problem**

Foster care is intended to be a temporary solution, but the goal of reunifying families is sometimes not possible. While in care, frequent housing changes for various reasons lead to school changes, learning difficulties and behavioral challenges that interfere with educational achievement. Young people leaving foster care are often at different levels of development and maturity and some are years behind emotionally due to their trauma. As a result of so many life disruptions, many foster youth struggle to obtain housing stability.

Transitioning to adulthood is a daunting challenge for young people and can be a frightening time for young adults exiting the foster care system. While young adults in general may face challenges in their pursuit of independence, they generally have family to help support them (Fry, Passel & Con 2020; Desilver 2016). Young adults from the foster care system face even greater challenges because their systems of support seem to disappear when they reach the age of 21. In the intellectual disability field, this loss of support at age 21 is called "the cliff," which aptly describes the plight of individuals leaving foster care (Polaneszky 2017).

Reilly (2003) reports that a large portion of young adults exiting foster care encountered significant challenges in their pursuit of independence. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019) characterize the outcomes of individuals who were in foster care in terms of lower graduation rates, lower employment rates, lower salaries when working, pregnancies, criminal involvement, and addictions. Unemployment rates from 10 to 40 percent have been reported (Courtney et al., 2009).

Educational achievement and economic welfare stand out as two factors that broadly affect the population of individuals who have lived in foster care settings. High school

graduation rates among youth who have been in foster care are as low as 50 percent (Clemens et al. 2017). Other research (Fowler et al. 2017) suggests that forty-two percent of foster care youth will not earn a high school diploma or GED before the age of 25.

The direct correlation of a lack of education with lower salary earnings over a lifetime leads to the cycle of poverty (Fowler et al. 2017). The decrease in earnings associated with low educational attainment is stark. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019) calculates that the lack of a high school diploma increases the likelihood of lower wage jobs, resulting in an estimated lifetime income and societal tax loss of \$410,659.20. Another analysis funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation through the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2013) explores the business case for investing in this population up front, including the income differential between foster care youth who graduate high school and those who do not. It is estimated that those who graduate high school earn an average of \$8,500 more per year more than youth in foster care who drop out high school (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative 2013). The same study estimates that with a four-year degree, youth in foster care could expect to earn approximately \$481,000 more on average over the course of their work-life than if they had only a high school diploma. Even if they do not graduate with a degree, having attended college increases their average work-life earnings by \$129,000 over a lifetime. Additionally, improving educational, employment and housing stability outcomes serve to reduce the need for reliance on public benefits, further highlighting the benefits of investing in supports for youth aging out of foster care (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative 2013; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney & Pollack 2009).

Homelessness is a likely outgrowth of reduced education and economic opportunities. As an example, the Bucks County Housing Group (undated) estimates that 48 percent of all homeless persons in Bucks County are children or transition age youth below the age of 24. Additional supports are needed to ease this transition from foster care to independence. Failure to provide these supports not only increases the likelihood of poor outcomes for those in foster care, it results in increased societal costs in terms of crime, social welfare supports, and reduced quality of life, including persistent and ongoing housing instability.

### **Tabor Children's Services Adolescent Initiative Program**

Tabor Children's Services, located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, has instituted *The Tabor Services Bucks County Adolescent Initiative Program (AIP)*, a multi-phase program that is comprised of four components designed to address the needs of youth who are aging out of the foster care system. The Independent Living component provides life skills training and supportive services for adolescents ages 14 to 18 in the county's child welfare and juvenile justice systems. With a focus on the skills necessary for self-sufficiency, the Independent Living program offers a series of classes that address a wide range of topics including resume writing, nutrition, housing, and money management. The next component is Board Extension which allows the continuation of services until the age of 21. Youth who participate in a Board Extension Program are required to be enrolled in post-secondary education and hold a part-time job. The Aftercare component offers services to youth who have aged out of the foster care system at age 18 and have not opted to participate in the Board Extension Program. Offered on an as-needed basis, this service provides short-term support and guidance with work, school, and

housing until the age of 21. The Mentoring component is offered to all AIP youth ages 14 to 21 and matches them with volunteer adult mentors who support and guide the youth toward independence.

### Outcomes

The outcomes for youth participating in the AIP program are positive. (See Figure 1.)

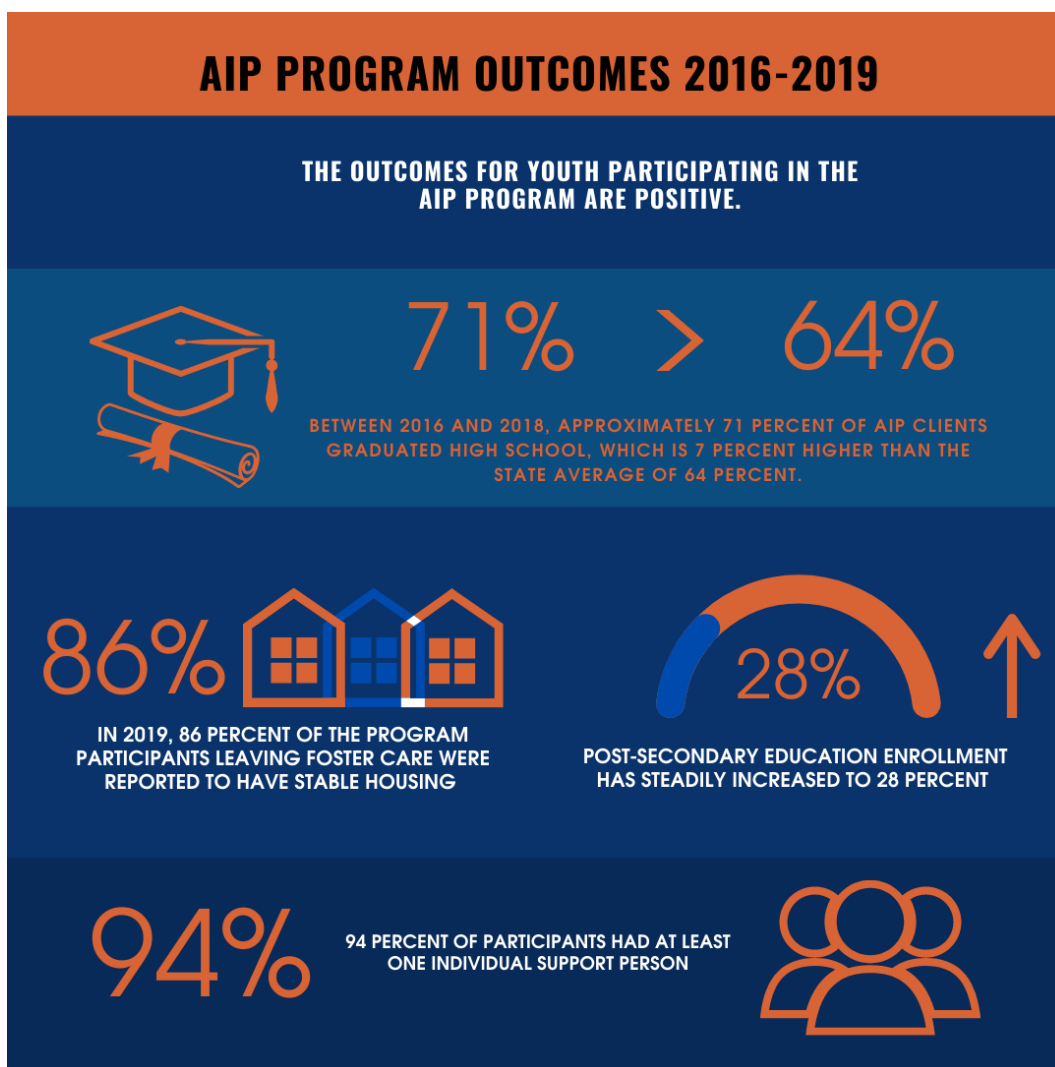


Figure 1

### Innovative New Solutions and Policy Recommendations

While promising, these results highlight the need for additional interventions and supports. A relatively small systems investment to support youth before they age out of child welfare services will dramatically reduce reliance on public systems over the lifetime. Tabor Children’s Services’ innovation is to leverage existing federal, state and local streams of funding

which are geared towards transitional housing supports to bridge the gap between leaving the child welfare system and entering the world of independent adulthood. This innovation is the Tabor Young Adult Program. Tabor Children's Services' new program will specifically target housing instability and leverage existing funding to support this effort. The organization has identified a major gap in services for youth who have aged out of the foster care system as they reach 21 and just beyond. As a result of changing federal legislation, more than half of all states have opted to extend access to child welfare services beyond the prior cut-off age of 18 to age 21 (Foster Care 2019). Research on the development of the adolescent brain indicates that young people are not fully mature until well into their twenties (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019), suggesting that services should be extended for young adults beyond age 21. The Affordable Care Act legislation, which granted young adults the ability to remain on their parents' health plan until age 26 is an example of federal legislation that helps to support young adults (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services 2021) in recognition of the nature of transitions to adulthood and independence. Keeping young people on insurance until 26 maintains access to care and preventive services, saving costs in the long run. In Pennsylvania, extending services to youth in foster care to the age of 23 was ratified in July 2020. However, limited funding means that only case management services can be provided to this vulnerable population at this time. The lack of designated funds on the federal, state, or local levels and the lack of clear programming for young adults between the ages of 21 and 23 limit the level of assistance that can be provided.

As part of its program development, Tabor Children's Services will collect additional data and input from youth using an Appreciative Inquiry approach to identify the key indicators of education, housing, employment, and permanent connections. Youth who have been through the AIP program will be interviewed in an effort to assess their perceptions on what services assisted them with their pursuit of independence, including Soft Skills and Life Skills Classes, After Care Services, Board Extension Services, Mentoring Services, and Youth Advisory Board meetings. Results will be used to assess how services can be strengthened and what services may need to be implemented so that education, housing, employment, and permanent connections are attained.

Initial data show that youth need to build life skills to help them achieve education, employment, and housing goals, and gain permanent connections with caring adults. Tabor plans to develop a new life skills curriculum, the Tabor Young Adult Program (TYA), which will incorporate topics such as education and career advancement, financial literacy, maintaining stability in employment, and a prepared renter's education program. These proposed changes will better prepare young adults to face their futures as productive taxpayers and become more independent and less reliant on public services.

Finally, woven into the Tabor Young Adult Program is leveraging funding sources which may be available through two pieces of legislation. In December 2020, Congress approved \$400 million for emergency Coronavirus funds through the COVID-19 Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act for former foster youth up to age 27. The legislation is part of an appropriations package which incorporated changes in several child welfare-related regulations and funding streams. Through this legislation, any youth who "aged out" of foster

care during the Coronavirus pandemic is eligible to return to care until they turn 22 or up until September 30, 2020, whichever comes first.

The second piece of legislation which could be leveraged to support the proposed TYA program is the HUD Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative, which provides grant funding for youth between the ages of 18 and 24 who have aged out of foster care and are at risk of homelessness. The grants must be administered by a child welfare agency and can provide up to three years of case management for young adults who utilize housing vouchers made available as part of the grant. Public Housing Authorities in partnership with Public Child Welfare Agencies are eligible to apply for funding through the FYI initiative. Given the high number of young people among Bucks County's homeless population, there should be significant interest in leveraging this funding to support youth aging out of foster care. These supports, paired with the new proposed Tabor Young Adult program curriculum and case management, are innovative approaches to improving outcomes for this extremely vulnerable population.

## **Conclusion**

Tabor's Young Adult Program is an innovative model addressing gaps in services at a key transition point for young adults exiting the child welfare system, while leveraging existing funding streams which will support housing stability. These relatively small investments at this transition phase will result in improved outcomes for foster care youth in the long run, and systems savings resulting from reduced need for reliance on public programs and benefits.

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Rosaleen Holohan is currently the Aftercare Specialist for the Adolescent Initiative Program (AIP) at Tabor Children's Services, Inc. in Doylestown, PA working with youth who are no longer in the Foster Care system but are still eligible for assistance. Previously, Rosaleen served as the AIP Mentoring Specialist and Youth Advisory Board Coordinator assisting Bucks County foster care youth development permanent connections and self-advocacy. Rosaleen has over 25 years working with children and adolescents in various capacities. Rosaleen holds a BA in English Literature and in Secondary Education from SUNY New Paltz and an MS in Non-Profit Leadership and Population Health Management from Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Dawn Mott is currently Tabor Services Independent Living Program Manager in Chester County working with individuals in the Foster Care and Juvenile Justice system. Previously, Dawn was

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