



**The Center for
Lived Experience™**

think of **US**

Exploring Federal Supports for Transition-Age Youth

Federal Convening Readout Report

Disclaimer:

This report is a readout of the ideas, perspectives, and insights shared by an group of 20 Ambassadors with experience in foster care during a convening with the U.S. Children's Bureau in February of 2023 and by the 58 policy advocates, practitioners, and people with lived experience in the child welfare system who contributed their expertise to the process.

The information and contents contained in this report represent the ideas of the Lived Experience Ambassadors and the community. **Their inclusion in this report should not be considered an endorsement by Think of Us or the Children's Bureau.**

Sharing and uplifting voices that are not typically given a space in policy conversations is a key component of our work. We believe that democratization of the policy process and free exchange of ideas are critical components of effective policy making.

Acknowledgments

Project Leads

Sixto Cancel, Steven Olender, and Taylor Vitello

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Lived Experience Ambassadors

Thank you to all 20 Lived Experience Ambassadors who lent their wisdom and expertise to this convening.



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Throughout the convening I felt like a true partner at the table...there was intentional, authentic collaboration. It's a paradigm shift in the way we are being viewed: as partners in the work, not just people to extract information from.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lived Experience Ambassadors

While it is not possible to capture the full range of lived experience perspectives in a single convening or with only 20 Ambassadors, Think of Us values diversity in all its engagements. An internal panel, including several staff members with lived experience, reviewed the full list of applicants for this Lived Experience Convening to select the final list of Ambassadors.

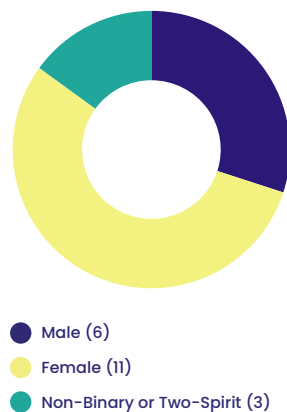
Applicants were assessed for overall preparedness for the process and the panel was careful to consider the demographic, geographic, and experiential diversity of applicants across a wide array of factors. Below are some of the factors deliberated on during the selection process.

Demographic Diversity

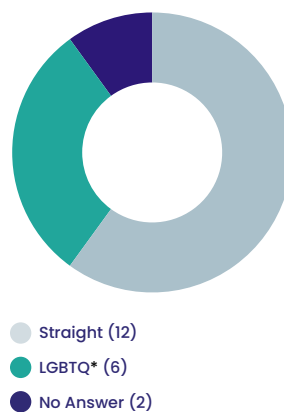
Race & Ethnicity



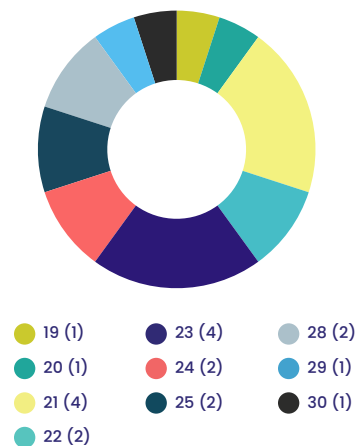
Gender Identity



Sexual Orientation



Age in Years



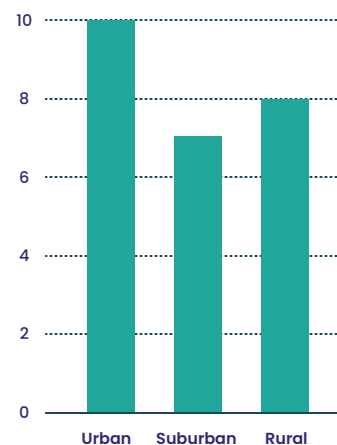
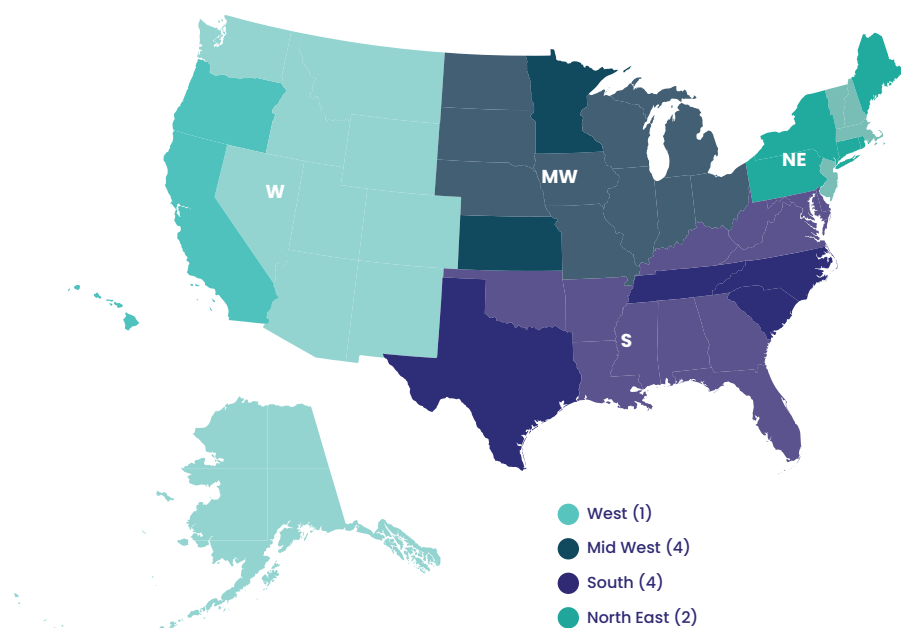
* LGBTQ denotes Ambassadors who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, queer, or a combination of sexual orientations and gender identities.

Lived Experience Ambassadors

Geographic Diversity

The Ambassadors represented 14 states across all regions

Geographic Type*

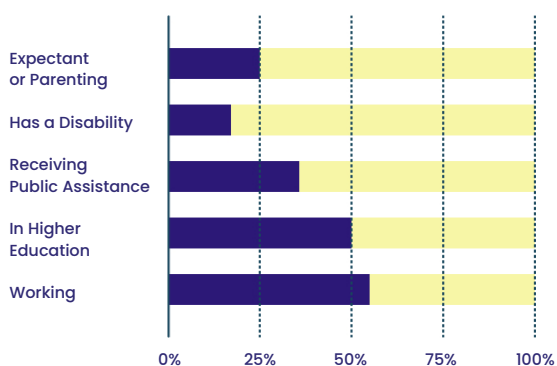
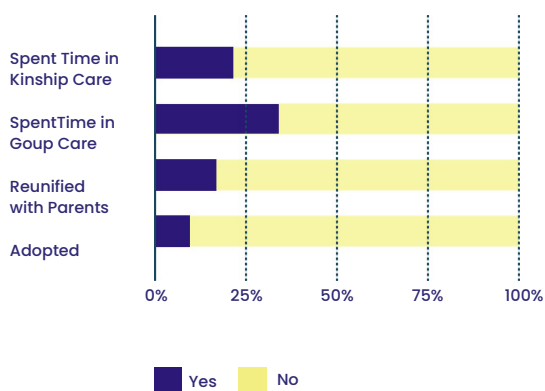


*Ambassadors were asked to identify the types of communities they lived in during their time in care.

Experiential Diversity*

While in Foster Care

Currently



*Ambassadors were asked to identify experiences they had during their time in care as well as their current experiences.

Our Vision



The feedback loop between people with lived experience in the child welfare system and those with positional power is fractured. Even as our field grows in its recognition of the central role that people impacted by the system should play in our policymaking process, we have focused on “engagement.” The sector has become very good at allowing people with lived experience to tell their stories, to give their recommendations, and to add a sense of urgency to our work.

While engagement is important, our goal should be true integration in the process. Engagement does not tap into the potential of those with lived experience to shape the policies we need for all children, youth, and families to have what they need to heal, develop, and thrive.

In the process of system reform, we identify problems; assess which parts of the problem we will solve and how; make compromises about where resources are allocated; and monitor, evaluate, and iterate. In our field, we are getting better at allowing those with lived experience to be part of the first step in the process; however, we still fall short when it comes to integrating them in the remaining steps. In most instances, once the problem is identified, it is those with positional power who scope solutions, weigh tradeoffs, and make final decisions based on the stories and recommendations that were shared.

With this convening, we wanted to prototype how to move from engagement to integration of lived experience. In the traditional engagement paradigm, we have asked those with lived experience to rely on their own personal narratives to create insights. With our Ambassadors, we asked them to process crowdsourced ideas, advocacy reports, and the perspectives of others with lived experience through the lens of their own proximity. Alongside powerful federal decision-makers, the Ambassadors were integrated in the policymaking process in ways that are normally reserved only for those with positional power, weighing tradeoffs and scoping solutions to the problems they identified.

In going beyond their own experiences and carrying the stories, research, and ideas of others with them, the Ambassadors entered the room not just as experts in their own stories, but as subject matter experts. They worked closely with federal agency staff not as an input or an anecdote, but as a partner with critical, nuanced understanding of the realities of the system.

Sixto Cancel,
Founder & Chief Executive Officer
Think of Us

Why Now?

Throughout 2021, Associate Commissioner Aysha E. Schomburg hosted a series of convenings with current and former foster youth to establish an equity-focused agenda for the Administration. She determined four key priority goals:

- 1 Prevent children from entering foster care.
- 2 Support for kinship caregivers.
- 3 Ensure youth leave care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports, and opportunities.
- 4 Invest in the child welfare workforce.



The Ask

As Associate Commissioner Schomburg began to build her work plan for Priority #3, she reached out to Think of Us to help convene young people with experience in care to provide insights about their needs and priorities. Think of Us and the Children's Bureau partnered to find a new way for the Associate Commissioner and her staff to move beyond traditional forms of engaging people with lived experience.

The Purpose

As policymakers increasingly see the value of lived experience, they have focused primarily on engagement, on allowing those with lived experience to identify problems and bring urgency to important issues. While engaging those with lived experience is becoming more commonly seen as an essential building block of policy, it is still exceedingly rare that lived experts are given an opportunity to move beyond recommendations and to truly partner on the work of weighing tradeoffs, determining areas of focus, and shaping policy.

This convening reflects an effort to craft a new policy paradigm, one in which we move beyond simple engagement and toward full integration of lived experience in the policy process. We believe this endeavor builds on the tireless efforts of trailblazing organizations and individuals who fight to give impacted communities a seat at the table and moves us a step closer to an ethos of policymaking in which those with lived experience are seen as partners in the process, not simply as early inputs.

Ways to Use This Document



Lead your own advocacy campaign based on what you find important.



Work within your state to implement these insights and recommendations.



Re-purpose this information to inspire your own reports, research, advocacy activities, roundtables, events, etc.



Convene those with lived experience in your jurisdiction to identify their priorities within the five themes.



Infuse lived experience in new and different ways in your jurisdiction by creating and implementing feedback loops.



For the first time in my life, I felt heard, seen,
and safe sharing my experience as someone
impacted by being in state custody as a child.

INTRODUCTION

Beyond Engagement: Integrating Lived Experience



The child welfare system was not designed to focus on or support the well-being of children and youth. It also was not designed to truly infuse the unique insights and expertise of people with lived experience into decision making.

As a result, policies and practices are conceived without critical information those with lived experience can provide, such as specific barriers; missed opportunities; unfulfilled needs; and what might be done differently.

The understanding and insights of youth and young adults who experienced foster care are essential to give full context to proposed policies and practices. They shed light on the challenges and barriers, identify practical solutions, and bolster our resolve to execute them. Successful efforts to reform our public institutions typically originate from and are supported by the communities impacted by the problems they seek to address. Conversely, reform efforts not driven by or co-designed with impacted communities lack the critical nuance necessary to understanding and addressing the underlying issues. Historical reform efforts have failed to solve the underlying problems of child welfare and in many instances have worsened them due to not centering lived experience.

Policymakers increasingly recognize the importance of lived expertise, but have centered their efforts on inviting impacted individuals to share their stories while allowing other people to contextualize these stories, draw conclusions, and identify solutions. While this nominal level of engagement can be emotionally powerful, it is rarely effective. Anecdotes, no matter how compelling, are easily dismissed and utilize only a fraction of the expertise of impacted people. At best, this practice greatly undervalues and underutilizes the practical expertise of our citizens and communities; at worst, it can be a cynical form of political theater.

Additionally, these experiences can be tokenizing, demoralizing, or harmful for those with lived experience who are invited to tell deeply personal stories with the promise that doing so will impact change. Individuals who often have a wealth of experience and insight can feel exploited when that expertise is reduced to a single traumatic narrative and they are excluded from the larger conversation.

The Ambassadors received training and preparation prior to the convening, and were given opportunities to engage with and receive feedback from many others with similar backgrounds and experiences. They were also provided compensation for their time and expertise.

This dynamic and thoughtful group of Ambassadors not only carried their own personal narratives, but were insightful representatives of their families, communities, service organizations, and numerous others with similar experiences and understanding. They contributed to this process with hope for envisioning and shaping a better future for those who come after them; to ensure all youth leave foster care with the relationships, supports, and opportunities they need to heal, develop, and thrive.



”

I felt empowered making recommendations to policymakers in the legislative and executive branches. The only word I can think of to describe what it felt like to be listened to and compensated for my ideas for child welfare policy is ‘profound.’

SECTION 1

Ambassador-Identified Focus Areas and Recommendations

Following days of discussion, reflection, brainstorming, and debate about key issues and themes, Ambassadors were asked to prioritize focus areas to share with policymakers.

The following pages contain a list of their identified focus areas, including potential actions identified by the Ambassadors and the field that the Children's Bureau and other policymakers can take to support these recommendations.

Note: Ambassadors did not rank their identified focus areas in order of importance.

Culturally Affirming Child Welfare: Throughout the convening, Ambassadors elevated the importance of resources, services, and interactions being delivered in ways that are culturally affirming, indicating it is imperative to mental, spiritual, and physical wellness. Though specifically mentioned in some of the recommendations below, the Ambassadors were adamant that centering cultural affirmation should permeate every action the Administration takes to support transition-age youth. Ambassadors were clear that this requires building new flexibilities in foster care that allow caseworkers and service providers to prioritize non-traditional and/or non-Western methods and ways of thinking.

PROPOSED FOCUS AREA #1

Involvement with the child welfare system, even when necessary, causes trauma for youth. Current system practices do not sufficiently center healing, forcing youth to navigate the transition to adulthood with unresolved trauma and little support. This calls for a shift from a trauma-informed system to one that is healing-centered and focused not only on mitigating the harm caused by the system, but also in giving youth the tools and resources they need to thrive.

Recommendation: Promote a child welfare model that centers lifelong healing for youth and focuses on mitigating system-induced trauma.

Potential administrative actions:

1. Create a task force to identify and analyze the key points during a child's involvement with the child welfare system that cause trauma and to recommend potential reforms to mitigate trauma and help youth heal.
2. Create a joint task force with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to surface opportunities that expand the availability and quality of healing services for youth in the foster care system.
3. Collaborate with court improvement programs to develop training for judges and attorneys about the necessity of recognizing certain behaviors as a response to trauma and their opportunities within the legal system to promote healing.
4. Develop and disseminate training for caseworkers and agency staff on effective strategies for mitigating the trauma of family separation and child welfare involvement, recognizing trauma-induced behavior, and helping children heal.
5. Collaborate with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to issue joint guidance on innovative ways title IV-E agencies can leverage Medicaid to fund services that support wellness and address trauma in foster care.
6. Publish guidance for child welfare agencies that elevates effective practices for helping youth deal with their grief, loss, traumas, and the emotional strain they experience due to their involvement with the child welfare system.
7. Publish guidance and provide technical assistance that helps title IV-E agencies implement trauma-informed and healing-centered staff training so youth do not feel punished when they lack the placement or stability they need.
8. Partner with private agencies to develop and improve comprehensive, trauma-informed models for foster parent and caregiver training to disseminate to the field.

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PROPOSED FOCUS AREA #2

Youth leave foster care without financial resources that help ease the transition to adulthood, causing fear, anxiety, and instability.

Recommendation: Provide asset-building programs such as matched savings, child savings accounts (like Opportunity Investment Accounts), and direct financial assistance.

Potential administrative actions:

1. Release demonstration grant funds to develop model asset-building programs, including matched savings and Opportunity Investment Accounts, and to build the evidence base for such models.
2. Release demonstration funds to develop methods of accessing flexible financial support for education, housing, and basic needs that do not require youth to maintain continued caseworker contact.
3. Issue guidance elevating existing examples of direct cash assistance programs for transition-age youth and highlighting the common elements of successful programs.
4. Initiate research into options for and the potential impacts of stepping down financial assistance as youth exit foster care, including interventions enacted legislatively at the state or federal level.
5. Initiate research and publish guidance on ways title IV-E agencies can provide funds to youth that are protected from potential extortion by caregivers.
6. Initiate research exploring the idea of giving youth a grace period after turning 26 (or earlier in states where services are not extended to 26) during which they can access flexible resources to ensure they remain financially and psychologically secure after aging out.
7. Publish comprehensive data on the impact of direct cash transfers to older youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, and provide guidance to states on utilizing direct payments to young people, allowing them to best meet their needs without oversight by state child welfare departments.

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PROPOSED FOCUS AREA #3

Young people are often surprised to learn about the resources available to them, having never been told they exist or provided support accessing them. Many youth with experience in foster care only received support they needed by finding it on their own.

Recommendation: The Children’s Bureau should collaborate and coordinate with agencies, organizations, and others to ensure information about existing resources, programs, and opportunities is readily available and easily accessible, and meaningfully engage lived experts in creating and disseminating these resources.

Potential administrative actions:

1. Collaborate with other Health and Human Services agencies to create a database of services available for youth in and exiting foster care that is accessible on portable electronic devices and computers.
2. Release demonstration funds to develop model programs and standards for connecting youth to available resources, akin to kinship navigator programs.
3. Build a catalogue of services for transition-age youth by inviting state Independent Living Coordinators and community partners serving transition-age youth to identify effective programs for this population.
4. Issue guidance on comprehensive planning for transition-age foster youth that includes multiple access points for resources and eliminates age requirements for service eligibility.
5. Issue guidance elevating the effectiveness of centralized resource programs, including virtual support services, family resource centers, and kinship navigators.
6. Conduct a review of programs serving transition-age youth and disseminate the findings to states to raise awareness of effective programs.

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PROPOSED FOCUS AREA #4

Youth report the programs meant to prepare them for financial literacy were insufficient and not relevant to their experiences. They stressed the importance of financial literacy programs that use accessible language and realistic examples and are accessible digitally and in person.

Recommendation: Help develop and promote effective and accessible financial literacy models and tools that cater to the unique needs, experiences, and circumstances of youth in foster care.

Potential administrative actions:

1. Release demonstration funds to develop new financial literacy models and adapt existing programs to specifically address the unique needs of transition-age youth.
2. Partner with the Financial Literacy and Education Commission (FLEC) and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) to ensure information and guidance about federal financial literacy and education programs, grants, and related information is provided to current and former foster youth.
3. Initiate and disseminate research regarding the impacts of coaching and mentorship on financial literacy for transition-age foster youth and the common elements of effective models.
4. Publish guidance on best practices for financial literacy training programs that target the unique needs of transition-age youth, including budgeting, credit, identity theft, and other relevant topics.
5. Provide technical assistance to states to improve youth-centered financial literacy training.

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PROPOSED FOCUS AREA #5

Youth in foster care, including transition-age youth, would greatly benefit from having mentors and opportunities to build relationships with others who have lived experience.

Recommendations: The Children’s Bureau should work to advance peer support and mentorship models by showcasing the value and importance of modalities centering lived experience; expanding available resources for peer support programs; and encouraging child welfare jurisdictions to invest in peer support and mentorship.

Potential administrative actions:

1. Clarify in the *Child Welfare Policy Manual* that title IV-E administrative funds can be used for peer support and youth engagement activities.
2. Amend future funding applications to require information about how peer-led services will be included in provision of services.
3. Release demonstration funds to help build an evidence base for peer support within child welfare that matches the extensive evidence of its effectiveness in the mental health and substance use fields.
4. Release discretionary funding for programs and child welfare agencies to hire lived experience experts as employees within their organizations and pay them at a competitive rate.
5. Release demonstration funds to help title IV-E agencies expand capacity for and effectiveness of peer support programming for youth dealing with grief, loss, and mental health needs and to develop new methodologies with a focus on cultural affirmation that target the unique needs of youth in foster care.
6. Provide demonstration funds to adapt existing peer support programs or develop new methodologies that specifically target youth exiting the foster care system to aid them in self advocacy.
7. Publish guidance highlighting the effectiveness of peer support programs in child welfare and other fields and possible avenues title IV-E agencies could use to improve the capacity and effectiveness of peer support programs.
8. Collaborate with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to develop and release joint guidance detailing how child welfare agencies can leverage Medicaid to provide peer support.
9. Initiate a study on the impacts of peer support programs in child welfare and the common elements of successful peer support programs for the child welfare population to build on the existing literature in other fields.

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PROPOSED FOCUS AREA #6

Expectant and parenting youth in foster placements have unique hardships and needs not met by the current policies and practices of the child welfare system.

Recommendation: Collaborate with expectant and parenting youth to identify and increase the supports and benefits available, including child care.

Potential administrative actions:

1. Partner with the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) on guidance to elevate use of Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) programs and home visitation programs designed specifically for youth in foster care.
2. Provide guidance to child welfare agencies on ways the title IV-E prevention program can be used to support expectant and parenting youth, including through definitions of candidacy and creative application of evidence-based services.
3. Partner with the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and release demonstration grant funds to develop specialized adaptations of MIECHV and other home visiting programs that can address the unique needs of expectant and parenting youth.
4. Partner with the Office of Child Care (OCC) and release demonstration grant funds to develop specialized adaptations of financial assistance for child care and related programs to address the unique needs of expectant and parenting youth.
5. Collaborate with the Office of Head Start (OHS) to develop policies and technical assistance ensuring expectant and parenting youth in and from foster care receive priority program entry.
6. Release demonstration funds to develop specialized programs that ensure expectant and parenting youth leaving care have all the supports they need to care for their child post-transition.
7. Initiate research to identify the common elements of successful programs that support expectant and parenting youth and share the outcomes across jurisdictions and community-based organizations.
8. Release guidance on strategies to ensure parenting youth have the support they need to care for their children and encourage states to end the practice of opening a child welfare case for the children of youth in foster care.
9. Provide guidance to title IV-E agencies on how to meet the needs of expectant and parenting youth in foster care that include trauma-informed care, parenting planning, and goal setting.

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I think permanent connections can truly be restorative and instill long-term, permanent people in your life who aren't being paid to connect with you.

SECTION 2

Strategic Design Session Readout and Recommendations

To prepare for the convening, Ambassadors participated in listening sessions, reviewed policy reports, and examined ideas crowdsourced from advocates, practitioners, and people with lived experience. Armed with this knowledge and their own lived experience, Ambassadors partnered with agency staff for three rounds of strategic design sessions during which they weighed tradeoffs. Below you will find the ideas and selections of the five with the greatest potential for all three rounds that were elevated during the strategic design sessions.



1. Relationships, Placement, and Permanent Connections Recommendations

- Increase enforcement of rules regarding maintaining connections with siblings, family, and friends, focusing particularly on flexibility and consistency and prioritizing a young person's connection to their roots and culture.
- Release guidance clarifying that maintaining family connections and other relationships should not be used as an incentive or reward for behavior.
- Focus on improving access to authentic, trustworthy relationships for transition-age youth throughout their time in care and beyond.
- Require that any public-private partnerships with or programs funded by the Children's Bureau meaningfully incorporate the perspectives and expertise of youth.
- Advance peer support and mentorship models by showcasing the value and importance of modalities that center lived experience; expanding available resources for peer support programs; and encouraging child welfare jurisdictions to invest in peer support and mentorship.
- Address the implicit and explicit discrimination surrounding placement and maintaining connections experienced by siblings and other youth in care.
- Develop policies that explicitly prohibit admitting youth into the juvenile justice system because of a lack of placement options in the child welfare system
- Ensure culturally and gender appropriate personal care items are easily accessible to all youth in care at all times.
- Work with the Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) to develop workforce training and coaching materials that encourage engaging youth when choosing placements to explore options that align with their life goals after foster care (e.g., in a city where they would like to live in adulthood or in a home that facilitates easy access to a training program for their preferred future career).
- Ensure that foster families are prepared, committed, culturally competent, and adequately trained in trauma-informed and healing-centered care.
- Publish guidance for title IV-E agencies stressing the importance of creating and maintaining a sense of normalcy for young people during their experience in foster care and highlighting effective practices for creating continuity for youth between their time in care and their lives before foster care involvement.
- Expand definitions of kin to include non-relatives that have a trusted relationship with the child or their family to allow greater flexibility in placement, mentorship, and family connections.

2. System Practices Recommendations

- Address policies and practices that create disincentives to permanency, particularly those related to finances and services.
- Establish policies and practices that recognize a youth's behavior is often a developmentally appropriate response to trauma and ensure youth are able to receive mental health support without fear of punishment.
- Improve communication and transparency throughout the child welfare system by requiring caseworkers, social workers, and other staff to be diligent and timely about informing youth regarding any changes in their case.
- Collaborate with juvenile justice organizations to create programs and support systems for youth with dual-system involvement, devoting special attention to ensuring the youth served have adequate supports from child welfare to deter deeper juvenile justice involvement.
- Establish policies and practices giving youth greater agency when determining where they are placed, allowing them a measure of control over matching and normalcy and ensuring that placements align with their beliefs.
- Increase accountability and transparency related to compliance and program improvement for programs funded and supported by the Children's Bureau.
- Establish and promote policies around prioritizing youth consent within the system
- Promote establishing state-level bills of rights for transition-age youth and creating ombudsman's offices to hold the system accountable to those rights.
- Release guidance on strategies for combatting favoritism in casework, so that youth don't have negative experiences based on personal relationships.
- Equip caseworkers, caregivers, judges, foster parents, court appointed special advocates, and attorneys with tools and training to support youth mental health.
- Ensure the child welfare system continues to prioritize permanency for transition-age youth as it improves preparing them for adulthood.
- Examine and amend current policies and practices within child welfare systems that impede healthy adolescent development.

3. Preparation for Adulthood Recommendations

- Assist child welfare agencies in shifting mental models away from case planning to well-being planning.
- Recognize the impacts of foster care do not end at 18 or 26 and promote policies and practices that remove age limits for youth to receive transition services.
- Establish and promote policies and practices that allow youth in foster care to choose their own support teams, including their caseworkers and attorneys.
- Ensure resources and services are available to all transition-age youth, regardless of their legal status.
- Ensure youth can access high-quality life skills training for self sufficiency, including mentorships, stability, coaching, and assistance with financial literacy at an earlier age and remove age limits on accessing these programs.
- Promote innovation within community-based program grants, pilot programs, and partnerships.
- Identify and remove barriers to extended care and housing for foster youth.
- Support benefits for expectant and parenting youth in foster care, including child care; increased prenatal and postpartum support; legal representation for those facing court cases themselves; and other resources.
- Focus on ensuring equitable access to services for foster youth during their transition to adulthood.
- Assist child welfare agencies with improving trainings to prepare their workforce, with a special focus on promoting equity.
- Collaborate and coordinate with agencies, organizations, and others to ensure information about existing resources, programs, and opportunities is readily available and easily accessible.

4. Health, Healing, and Well-being Recommendations

- Allow child welfare systems the flexibility to provide culturally-relevant, non-traditional and/or non-Western therapies and healing chosen by youth based on their goals and desires.
- Promote a model of child welfare that centers lifelong healing for youth and focuses on mitigating system-induced trauma.
- Recognize that not every young person in care needs medication or a diagnosis and establish policies and practices that govern the responsible use of medication and give youth the autonomy to make decisions regarding their own medical care.
- Release demonstration funds to develop culturally specific adaptations to existing programs and practices.
- Establish policies ensuring all youth exiting care have automatic, continuous access to healthcare benefits until age 26, regardless of their legal status, and supporting their access beyond age 26.
- Focus on ensuring child welfare agencies have the capacity and flexibility to provide well-being support pre-crisis.
- Advance peer support and mentorship models by showcasing the value and importance of modalities centering lived experience.
- Establish policies and practices to ensure youth can access to high-quality food choices in all placements, including institutional settings, by facilitating access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- Provide assistance to state and tribal child welfare agencies to improve the capacity for and quality of their addiction and rehabilitation options.
- Increase accountability and oversight of state child welfare systems to ensure they are adequately preparing young people for the transition to adulthood.

5. Economic Security Recommendations

- Partner with other agencies to establish programs and practices that protect the credit of youth in foster care and support them in building credit.
- Promote developing and expanding high-quality workforce development and skill building programs tailored to the unique needs of transition-age youth.
- Increase states' compliance with and accountability for rules and regulations that support transition-age foster youth accessing necessary documents.
- Establish and promote financial literacy programs, including coaching and mentorship, that are relevant to the experiences and circumstances of foster youth.
- Collaborate with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to improve housing supports for transition-age youth, with a focus on improving the accessibility and quality of vouchers, housing communities and collaborations, and transitional housing.
- Promote the capacity of child welfare agencies to provide asset-building programs such as matched savings, children's savings accounts (CSA), and direct financial assistance.



I need resources to be readily available so I can be a productive and active member of society despite my adversity, hardship, and displacements. I went through years of trial and error just trying to figure out where to start and feel like I'm constantly running a marathon to catch up.

SECTION 3

Convening Design Process

Project Planning

In 2022, following an extensive process that involved substantial input from lived experts, Associate Commissioner Aysha E. Schomburg, J.D., announced four key priorities for the Children’s Bureau:

- 1 Prevent children from entering foster care.
- 2 Support for kinship caregivers.
- 3 Ensure youth leave care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports, and opportunities.
- 4 Invest in the child welfare workforce.

As her administration shifted its focus to priority #3, Think of Us entered into a partnership with the Children’s Bureau to support their commitment to ensuring their actions are informed by lived expertise.

While previous engagements with lived experts have been fruitful, we saw this as an opportunity to shift the way lived experts are engaged in federal policymaking. Throughout discussions with lived experts in our network and on our staff, a common theme was that engagements felt extractive and young leaders felt like they were viewed as a tool that could be used for their stories. Lived experts reported engagements often felt traumatic, but they participated anyway because they felt a responsibility to improve the system for young people still in foster care.

With this convening, Think of Us was committed to shifting away from that paradigm and into one where lived experts are seen as partners with the valuable insights needed to effectively prioritize and scope work. The goal of this convening was to build a new model for engaging lived experts that was empowering and even healing, rather than extractive or coercive.

Given the urgency of the situation and the opportunity to have an uninterrupted day and a half with Associate Commissioner Schomburg, Think of Us conceived, scoped, and executed this plan under an abbreviated timeline of just over three weeks.



Recruitment

Application Process

Due to the limited number of spaces that could be offered for this event, Think of Us executed a targeted outreach plan to recruit a diverse pool of Ambassadors for the convening without requiring too many lived experts to undergo an unnecessary application process. We partnered with trusted organizations for this outreach, including the Center for the Study of Social Policy; the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute; the Connecticut Youth Advisory Board; the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative; Journey to Success; the National Association of Counsel for Children; and National Crittenton. As future opportunities arise, Think of Us plans to diversify the partners engaged on each occasion to ensure a diverse array of lived experts are provided the chance to participate without requiring an extensive application process in which the vast majority of people will not be selected.

To assist Think of Us with recruiting Ambassadors, partner organizations shared an application form with their networks of lived experts. The form included questions about demographics, affiliations, and their experiences within and outside of the foster care system, as well as two open-ended questions assessing their interest in engaging with the subject matter of the convening.

In the end, 55 lived experts applied for 20 available spots. Applicants were given the option to indicate whether they would be interested in future opportunities if they were not selected for the Lived Experience Convening. All 55 applicants selected that they would be interested in future opportunities.



Selection Process

A panel of Think of Us staff, including several staff members with lived experience in child welfare, convened once the application was closed to evaluate applications and select Ambassadors. While applicants were assessed for overall preparedness for the opportunity, the primary objective of the selection process was to gather as diverse a group of Ambassadors as possible. The selection panel analyzed demographic characteristics, including age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and location, seeking representation based on both regional and urban, suburban, and rural divides.

Since diversity extends well beyond demographics, the panel also considered several markers of experiential diversity that were particularly pertinent for transition-age youth. These included parenthood, homelessness, disability, higher education, public benefits, and work experience in addition to experiences within the system, including reunification, adoption, aging out, and placement with kin or in institutional settings.

Twenty (20) Ambassadors were selected based on these criteria. The selection panel also chose alternate Ambassadors in the event some candidates were unable to accept the role, ensuring we would still have a diverse pool of Ambassadors. However, every selected Ambassador accepted the role.

Logistics

Travel

Think of Us considers it vitally important that participating in convenings or other events is not a financial burden for lived experts. Therefore, we take steps to ensure all logistical expenses are paid for by the organization up front, rather than requiring lived experts to submit for reimbursement.

All travel expenses to and from the convening were covered by Think of Us or by partner organizations and travel logistics were arranged by Think of Us. We asked Ambassadors to propose the most convenient option for a flight or other mode of transportation, which was then confirmed and purchased by Think of Us staff. Each Ambassador was provided a code for an Uber voucher to use for transportation to and from the airport or train station.

Think of Us arranged hotel accommodations for all Ambassadors at a hotel a short distance from the Switzer Building.

Compensation

Ambassadors were paid a stipend according to Think of Us' compensation rates, including four hours at a standard hourly rate for the training, listening, and prep sessions and three days at the standard daily rate. The final amount of the stipend covered the two days of the convening and an additional day of travel for a total of \$1,350. Ambassadors were also offered an opportunity to receive additional compensation by contributing to a literature review. The Ambassadors who chose this option read and drew conclusions from work produced by advocacy groups, and provided summaries for the other Ambassadors. They were compensated at the standard hourly rate for this work.

To cover the cost of incidentals and meals not provided during the convening, Ambassadors were provided per diem on a Visa gift card. In addition, Ambassadors who are parents were given a stipend of \$75 per day to reimburse them for any child care expenses they incurred while participating in the convening.



Preparation



Training

Think of Us hosted training sessions to ensure Ambassadors felt prepared to engage effectively in this convening. We contracted with a consulting firm led by lived experts, Unicorn Solutions, LLC., to co-develop and lead the learning opportunity. We held two separate training sessions — one on a weekday evening and one during the day on a Saturday — to accommodate Ambassadors' schedules and ensure they did not have to miss work to attend.

The training focused on providing a foundation in administrative advocacy and a background on the Children's Bureau, including its history, priorities, powers, and limitations.

Listening Sessions

To shift the Ambassadors' orientation towards thinking about broader systemic issues through the lens of their own experience rather than simply recounting their experiences, Think of Us held a listening session the weekend before the Ambassadors came to Washington, D.C. Ambassadors had the opportunity to hear other young people with lived experience in the child welfare system, most of whom were drawn from applicants not selected for the convening, share their priorities for system reform.

The Ambassadors listened in as session participants were guided through a facilitated discussion centering around four main questions.

1. What are the issues you feel are most important right now for policymakers to hear about from young people who have experienced foster care?
2. Was there a change that you experienced during your time in or after foster care that you think would make a positive difference for others?
3. Is there anything that's working really well in your community that federal policymakers should know about?
4. If you could wave a magic wand, what would you do to better support young people during their transition from foster care to adulthood?

Participants were compensated for their time and expertise at the listening session.



Crowdsourcing

Think of Us wanted to provide Ambassadors a grounding in the potential policies being discussed at the federal level to ensure they felt comfortable engaging with federal policymakers. To that end, we put out a call to policy advocates and practitioners to crowdsource ideas for potential actions the Children’s Bureau could take to improve outcomes and experiences for older youth in foster care. We compiled the responses we received into a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, list of options for advocates to consider.

The document was shared with Ambassadors, who were then given the opportunity to comment on or add to the ideas contained therein. They were encouraged to use it as a tool to expand their beliefs about what is possible, but were cautioned to not limit their ideas to only what had been presented.



Pre-Convening Working Session

The purpose of the pre-convening workshop was to give Ambassadors the opportunity to debrief the listening session and prepare for the convening. Think of Us staff talked through the logistics of the event and gave Ambassadors a chance to ask any last-minute questions. The session was also a chance to remind the Ambassadors of the expectations for the convening:

- Ambassadors were being asked to share their expertise, not their stories. While they could share their stories if they wanted, it was not an expectation.
- Ambassadors should not feel the need to engage in any way that felt harmful, exploitative, or unhealthy and were encouraged to step away at any point if doing so was helpful for their mental or emotional health.
- Think of Us would never use money to coerce Ambassadors into a psychologically harmful situation, so if Ambassadors backed out of the convening, they would still receive compensation.



Pre-Convening Social

Think of Us held a social the night before the convening to build camaraderie between Ambassadors.

The social had no specific agenda and was simply intended to be a relaxed gathering with food and games where the Ambassadors could get comfortable with each other. Children's Bureau staff and organizational partners who would be at the convening were also invited to attend.



Materials provided

Prior to travel, Ambassadors were sent materials to help them navigate the convening:

- A Participant Well-being Packet containing soothing exercises to manage heightened emotions in the moment; self-care resources to maintain lower stress; and connections to organizations that could help.
- A detailed schedule of events.
- Travel resources that included the weather forecast for the trip, key contact information, travel instructions, and a packing checklist.

Convening

Attendees

The convening took place over one and a half days at the Mary E. Switzer Federal Office Building. Think of Us staff were joined by partners from the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, Child Focus, and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, as well as MeRo Potter, to support the Ambassadors through the process. Think of Us also retained April M. Curtis, a seasoned lived experience leader and clinical social worker, to ensure the convening remained psychologically safe and healthy for Ambassadors.

A strong contingent of career and political staff joined for the convening, including:

- **Aysha E. Schomburg**, Associate Commissioner, Children's Bureau
- **January Contreras**, Assistant Secretary, Administration for Children and Families
- **Jeff Hild**, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Administration for Children and Families
- **Rebecca Jones Gaston**, Commissioner, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (via Zoom)
- **Liz Ryan**, Administrator, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
- Career staff from the **Children's Bureau** and **OJJDP**

Context Setting

The convening opened with a joint introduction by staff from Think of Us and the Children's Bureau and opening remarks from Associate Commissioner Schomburg. This was followed by a presentation from Children's Bureau staff to provide greater context about the Children's Bureau, its history and powers, and its role in the full child welfare continuum. This included an overview of this Administration's actions to date and a review of the Associate Commissioner's priorities.

Following these remarks, April Curtis reiterated for Ambassadors that they were there as partners and experts in the convening and the event was not meant to be a space for them to bare their trauma. They were encouraged, again, to take space as needed and reminded she would be available for support throughout the convening. Ambassadors were given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify any outstanding confusions that could hinder their work during the convening.





Strategic Design Sessions

In order to give Ambassadors the opportunity to provide meaningful context to the issues they saw as most pressing, Ambassadors and agency staff broke into five small groups to work through a structured process of surfacing and evaluating potential actions the Children's Bureau could take to support transition-age youth. Each group included four Ambassadors, at least one federal team member, and a facilitator and centered around five major areas:

1. **Relationships, Placement, and Permanent Connections**
2. **System Practices**
3. **Preparation for Adulthood**
4. **Health, Healing, and Well-being**
5. **Economic Security**

Over three rounds of the structured process, Ambassadors and staff were tasked with boosting their top 3-5 highest priorities based on three categories:

1. **Depth of Impact – How transformational would this policy be?**
2. **Breadth of Impact – How large is the population that would be affected?**
3. **Impact on Equity – How would the action impact specific populations that are inequitably served by the child welfare system (based on race/ethnicity, geography, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, tribal status, or other factors)?**

Following the three sessions, attendees reconvened to share the ideas they prioritized and discuss ideas that had surfaced. This presented the opportunity for Ambassadors to share their perspectives, ideas, and experiences and for federal agency staff to ask deeper follow-up questions.

Prioritization

For the final day of the convening, Think of Us staff consolidated the ideas that surfaced during the strategic design sessions, removing duplicates and sorting ideas to be digestible. Ambassadors were given the opportunity to reflect on the ideas and tasked with prioritization. Acknowledging the limited capacity of the Children's Bureau to enact changes, we asked Ambassadors to prioritize ideas through a voting process wherein each Ambassador could select up to three priorities. The votes were tabulated, revealing six recommendations that received the overwhelming majority of votes. A discussion was held following the prioritization exercise and Ambassadors were given the opportunity to highlight the importance of any ideas that were not chosen and surface any ideas or perspectives they hadn't had a chance to share previously in the convening.

Closing and Reflection

The convening closed with a chance for all participants to reflect on the experience. Ambassadors and the Children's Bureau alike committed to continued conversation and collaboration around these issues.





Many of us have a shared experience of feeling like we're being groomed for incarceration.

SECTION 4

Limitations and Reflections

This Lived Experience Convening represented a new method of engaging lived experts in federal advocacy. While we were extremely pleased by the outcome and the response from Ambassadors, we saw many opportunities for improvement.

Due to the urgency of the moment and the availability of senior federal staff, this Lived Experience Convening was conducted on an abbreviated timeline, just over three weeks from conception to execution. As such, some elements that ideally would have been included in the preparation for the convening were not feasible.

Listening Sessions

In preparation for another Lived Experience Convening, ideally we will hold a minimum of two listening sessions with additional lived experience experts. It also would have been beneficial to hold a listening session with professional advocates in addition to those with the lived experience experts, to give the Ambassadors a firmer grasp on the state of federal Administrative advocacy.

Crowdsourcing

Having more time to crowdsourcing ideas for Administrative action would have been beneficial. The truncated timeline for this portion of the preparation meant many advocates who would have contributed ideas were unable to, and those who offered ideas felt rushed and like they could not devote the time necessary to fully contribute. In addition, Ambassadors had very little time to explore the ideas that were crowdsourced once they were submitted and compiled. Crowdsourcing ideas could be more fruitful in the future with a longer timeline.

Youth Still in Care

For this Lived Experience Convening, Ambassadors ranged in age from 19 to 29 years. As initially conceived, the convening would also have included transition-age youth from 14–18 years of age who were still in foster care as part of the pool of Ambassadors. Given the time constraints, it was not possible to obtain the clearance necessary to include minor youth still in care.





The silence of our voices was one of the harshest things we endured.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. References

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Appendix B. Crowdsourcing Ideas

Thank you to the organizations and individuals who helped to compile the options in this list, including All God's Children International; American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law; Children's Advocacy Institute; Congressional Research Institute for Social Work Policy (CRISP); FaithBridge; Frederick County Department of Social Services; International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children; John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY); Journey to Success; Minnesota Youth Leadership Council; New America; Project Foster Power at the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center; University of Washington; University of Wisconsin-Stout; Youth Law Center; and Youth Villages.

Thanks also goes to the individuals who contributed ideas to this list, including Kathryn A, Rowan A, Sabrina A, Abbie B, Angie C, Brianna D, Jorie D, Leah D, Vivian D, Alexis E, Jesse F, Yalanis G, Kennethia H, Heavyn K, Alisiana M, Jennifer M, Oulu N, Amanda O, Jordan S, Olivia S, Victor S, Brandy W, and Calvisha W.

Disclaimer: The following lists represent potential actions the Children's Bureau can take to improve the outcomes of transition-age youth. These ideas in were crowdsourced from child welfare professionals and people with lived experience in the system. The items on this list have not been approved by the Children's Bureau and do not, in any way, represent a commitment from the agency or endorsement by Think of Us.

Economic Security

1.) Improve the quality and efficacy of housing vouchers (FUP, Section 8, state programs, etc.).

- a. Collaborate with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to eliminate barriers to utilizing Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers, including developing strategies to increase the number of landlords who will take FUP vouchers.
- b. Collaborate with HUD to establish single points of contact at the national and state levels to ensure that the Foster Youth Independence (FYI) program is maximizing housing supports and services for transition-age youth.
- c. Collaborate with HUD to expedite the process for foster youth to receive housing vouchers, both FUP and Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV, aka Section 8), so they are able to get support more quickly; the process takes seven (7) months in certain jurisdictions.
- d. Collaborate with HUD to publish guidance for states regarding best practices for expediting eligibility determinations for state housing programs.
- e. Publish joint guidance with HUD directing housing authorities in all states to prioritize providing housing to former foster youth of all ages, including those with dependents.

2.) Support youth in buying homes and building assets.

- a. Collaborate with HUD on researching and creating guidance about rent-to-own programs for foster youth, such as the Maine program that builds tiny homes for youth so home ownership and resource building are accessible.
- b. Collaborate with HUD on research and guidance to support youths' efforts to purchase homes after they have aged out of independent living.
- c. Collaborate to create options for affordable housing, such as tiny houses.

3.) Initiate research and publish guidance about best practices to prevent youth from facing homelessness after aging out.

- a. Initiate research on the potential impacts of removing the requirement that no more than 30% of Chafee funds can be used for room and board.
- b. Publish guidance and initiate research about the impacts of secure, long-term, state-level set-asides to prevent homelessness among former foster youth (such as the 10% set-aside JBAY advocated for in California from the state's Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention Program).

4.) Help ensure youth have the skills they need for productive and fruitful participation in the workforce.

- a. Issue guidance on best practices for helping foster youth maintain employment while in care.
- b. Issue guidance on best practices for helping foster youth establish connections for job searching.
- c. Provide more critical guidance to states and counties on how to use federal or state funding to design programs targeted for employment, professional development, and job readiness life skills to enhance youths' financial stability, career goals, and overall life success.

5.) Promote different methods for providing direct financial support to transition-age foster youth.

- a. Initiate research into possible options for stepped down financial assistance following extended foster care (EFC) placement.
- b. Initiate research to explore giving youth a grace period after they turn 26 and continue providing resources to ensure they are still comfortable and secure.
- c. Initiate research into methods of flexible financial support for education, housing, and basic needs that do not require youth to maintain continued caseworker contact.
- d. Initiate research and publish guidance on ways to provide funds to youth that are protected from potential extortion by caregivers.
- e. Issue guidance elevating direct cash assistance programs for transition-age foster youth.
- f. Publish comprehensive data on the impact of direct cash transfers to older youth

during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide guidance to states on utilizing direct payments young people, allowing them to best meet their own needs without oversight by state child welfare departments.

6.) Protect foster youths' benefits (OASDI, SSI, VA) and assets while they are in care.

- a. Issue guidance and policy changes around preserving foster youths' benefits (OASDI, SSI, VA) and assets while they are in care.
- b. Require child welfare systems to repay stolen SSI funds to former foster youth.

7.) Support high-quality financial literacy training.

- a. Publish guidance on best practices for financial literacy training that includes information about budgeting, credit, identity theft, and more.
- b. Provide technical assistance to states to improve youth-centered financial literacy training.

8.) Protect the credit of foster youth.

- a. Increase oversight, accountability, and data collection to ensure youth leave care with their credit intact and all of their vital documents as required by law.
- b. Collaborate with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) to address credit and identity theft.
- c. Develop regulation or guidance on helping foster youth establish credit, since most leave the system with no credit or access to cosigners.
- d. Develop guidance for states on best practices to protect foster youth from predatory loans and identity theft.

9.) Ensure youth have all documentation needed for a successful transition to adulthood.

- a. Ensure youth have access to drivers' licenses and other vital documents.
- b. Develop joint regulations or guidance on transition planning and discharge document requirements with the Department of Education (DOE), Department of Labor (DOL), HUD, and CMS.

Health, Healing, and Well-being

1.) Increase the availability and quality of mental health resources for transition-age foster youth.

- a. Develop and disseminate guidance to states around best practices to increase access to youth-friendly mental health services and resources.
- b. Release demonstration funds to expand mental health treatment, peer support, and group counseling for youth dealing with grief, loss, and mental health needs and create new methodologies for serving foster youth.

- c. Publish guidance on how state agencies can help youth deal with their grief, loss, traumas, and the emotional strain they experience due to their involvement with the child welfare system.
- d. Create a task force to analyze system practices to determine what changes can be made to prevent system-induced trauma and help youth heal.
- e. Collaborate with CMS to issue joint guidance on the use of Medicaid to fund services that support wellness and address trauma in foster care.
- f. Increase oversight of federally funded mental health programs and residential and group placements for youth.
- g. Require data collection regarding positive health outcomes and youth empowerment, not just negative outcomes.
- h. Publish guidance on best practices to ensure youth maintain continuity of service professionals. Having a long-term therapist also helps youth access other services and resources such as adult skills.

2.) Ensure effective implementation of the SUPPORT Act to ensure foster youth can remain on Medicaid until age 26.

- a. Coordinate with CMS and issue joint guidance on the implementation of the SUPPORT Act to ensure the legislation is successfully deployed.
- b. Work with CMS on an expedited process for Section 1115 waivers that would allow foster youth who turned 18 before January 1, 2023 to remain on Medicaid until age 26 regardless of their state of residence.
- c. Provide technical assistance to states related to the SUPPORT Act, and encourage states to continue Medicaid coverage for youth who turned 18 before January 1, 2023 but are still in extended foster care.

3.) Enhance the effectiveness of Medicaid programs and other health care for foster youth.

- a. Issue guidance encouraging Medicaid managed care organizations (MCOs) within foster care to include aftercare services for children and youth who are reunified, adopted, or enter into guardianship.
- b. Develop joint guidance with CMS on how child welfare agencies can leverage Medicaid to provide peer support, enhanced case management, and non-traditional interventions.
- c. Collaborate with CMS to highlight states' partnerships with MCOs/Care Management Organizations (CMOs) to offer services that have a positive impact on meeting the social determinants of health needs of transition-age youth and young adults.
- d. Initiate research into an open-benefit option regardless of a qualifying activity for young adults transitioning to adulthood.
- e. Examine the barriers youth face accessing health care services, including losing Medicaid eligibility due to certain permanency conditions.
- f. Issue guidance clarifying that states must enroll eligible young people in Medicaid

under the former foster youth eligibility category before they leave foster care at age 18 or older to increase the odds of meeting the physical and behavioral health care needs of young adults.

- g. Collaborate with CMS to issue joint guidance on expanding peer support services for foster youth using Medicaid.
- h. Improve federal oversight of states' Health Care Oversight and Coordination Plan required under 42 U.S.C. 622 (b)(15) to ensure meaningful interagency coordination, improved planning between child and adult serving systems, and increased oversight of the use of psychotropic medication.

4.) Help youth navigate the healthcare system.

- a. Provide guidance to states on methods to build youths' skills related to navigating their own health care including mental, physical, emotional, medication management, etc.
- b. Create templates to help youth apply for health care once their coverage from foster care ends that can be shared with states.
- c. Collaborate with CMS to issue joint guidance on using Medicaid to improve care coordination for youth in and leaving foster care.

5.) Help ensure that youth in care have normative experiences.

- a. Update guidance on the reasonable and prudent parent standards to empower professionals and caregivers to create better access to activities and experiences for foster youth that are similar to those of their peers.
- b. Issue guidance to increase awareness of the importance of normalizing experiences for youth in care, such as joining a soccer team, having a sleepover at a friend's house, or learning how to drive.
- c. Publish guidance on the importance of personal care products for youth, particularly culturally-specific and culturally-affirming products. Encourage states to improve the quality of products they provide, as the products in children's homes are generally the same products found in jails, reinforcing a foster-care-to-prison pipeline and causing youth to believe institutionalization or incarceration are inevitable.
- d. Clarify that states can use Chafee funds to pay for driving-related expenses including driver's education, insurance, car repairs, or access to a vehicle.
- e. Initiate studies into the impact of normalizing experiences on foster youth and the consequences when youth are denied opportunities to participate in the same rites as their peers.
- f. Develop regulations and guidance on ensuring normalcy provisions are fully integrated into the case plan and court process and are compliant with current law.

Relationships, Placement, and Permanent Connections

1.) Promote policies that maintain family connections.

- a. Disseminate best practices for connecting siblings after separation and following adoption.
- b. Increase enforcement of the provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act that require states to make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections.
- c. Publish guidance defining “reasonable efforts” for the purposes of maintaining sibling connections.
- d. Issue guidance encouraging states to require visitation between siblings who have been separated by placement or adoption.
- e. Increase oversight of non-family placement settings to ensure reasonable efforts are being made to maintain relationships and connections.

2.) Promote policies that help youth build relationships while in care.

- a. Provide guidance on best practices for identifying an array of strong, healthy permanent connections for older youth and young adults in care and supporting them in strengthening those relationships prior to exiting care.
- b. Publish guidance elevating mentorship practices for youth in foster care. Make it clear that mentorship programs have a strong, positive impact on youth at all stages, including post-permanency.
- c. Initiate research or release demonstration funds to study the efficacy of life coach program models to help youth aging out of foster care.

3.) Promote the stability of permanency arrangements.

- a. Disseminate an Information Memorandum (IM) on best practices for aftercare services following adoption or transfer of custody placements.
- b. Disseminate guidance detailing best practices for continuing family counseling and mental health support services for youth and families post-permanency.
- c. Encourage states to include post-permanency services as part of their service arrays and definitions of candidacy for purposes of the title IV-E prevention program.
- d. Publish guidance highlighting the potential strain that adoption, guardianship, and reunification can have on existing family structures and on best practices for utilizing post-permanency services to keep families together.

4.) Ensure permanency remains a top priority for older youth.

- a. Eliminate out-of-date regulations on Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA).
- b. Update the program instructions for the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act to clarify that permanency is still a priority for older youth and that “independence” is not an acceptable permanency plan for youth at any age.

- c. Eliminate “long-term foster care” and “emancipation” from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) as case plan goals as they do not reflect case or permanency planning goals.
- d. Provide guidance to states on best practices to increase permanency for older youth.
- e. Clarify that title IV-E administrative funds can be used for permanency services.
- f. Offer technical assistance to states to help them improve programs related to permanency for older youth.
- g. Require that states include details in their title IV-E and IV-B plans on the array of services and supports that make up the continuum of permanency services that allow them to meet reasonable efforts. The plan should specifically detail how the service array meets the needs of older youth and permanency providers.

5.) Issue guidance detailing options for flexible living arrangements for youth in supervised independent living that fit the normalcy experiences of their peers. This can include returning to their families of origin, living with their significant others, or any other safe living arrangement.

6.) Increase oversight of the adoption subsidy.

7.) Improve the quality of foster parents for transition-age youth.

- a. Collaborate with private agencies to develop and improve model foster parent training to disseminate to the field. Training should include information about life skills development, mental health and trauma, and college and career readiness.
- b. Increase oversight of title IV-E agencies to ensure that foster care licensing and training is being conducted at a high standard.

8.) Improve the outcomes and experiences of youth placed in non-family settings.

- a. Develop guidance on the group care provisions of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) to ensure the exceptions to the Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP) requirement are not used to support increasing group care for older youth.
- b. Develop federal guidance defining what it means to be “at risk of sex trafficking” and outlining the requirements of non-family settings caring for youth at risk of sex trafficking to close the loophole that states are using to place more youth in congregate care with less oversight.
- c. Increase oversight of the group care provisions in FFPSA.
- d. Provide guidance for states around safety, well-being, and prevention for transition-age youth entering group, juvenile, and residential placements.
- e. Increase and enforce penalties for states and counties that fail to protect children and youth in their care.
- f. Provide guidance encouraging states to standardize room and board settings for transition-age youth, including what is authorized under Fostering Connections, to allow for more diverse living arrangements.

- g. Conduct research on the impact of sleeping in offices on children's physical and mental health, educational outcomes, and overall well-being. The study could include interviews and surveys with youth who have slept in offices, as well as data analysis of their outcomes compared to youth in other living arrangements. The findings of this study could inform policy and practice to better support children in such situations.

Preparation for Adulthood

1.) Improve the John H. Chafee Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.

- a. Initiate research into the potential impact of increasing the maximum age served by the Chafee program.
- b. Initiate research into the impact of increasing or removing asset limits for the Chafee program.
- c. Create a working group with state-level Chafee advocacy groups to surface nuanced information about challenges related to transition.
- d. Clarify that training can be covered by title IV-E funds instead of using limited Chafee dollars.
- e. Provide demonstration funding for innovation and evidence-building for transition-age youth to help ensure the Chafee program meets desired results.
- f. Initiate studies into the impacts of skill-building programs and services for youth that help them independently manage their own health once they transition.

2.) Improve the quality and efficacy of programming for transition-age youth.

- a. Publish guidance elevating evidence-based services that have a record of improving outcomes for transition-age youth.
- b. Provide demonstration grant funding to promote evidence-based programming to support transition-age youth.
- c. Invite state Independent Living Coordinators and community partners that serve transition-age youth to recommend effective programs and build a catalog of services for this population.
- d. Conduct a review of programs serving transition-age youth and circulate findings to states to raise awareness of effective programs.

3.) Help improve supervised independent living programs.

- a. Initiate studies into the efficacy of independent living programs (ILP).
- b. Require states to report participation rates in ILP.
- c. Issue guidance on minimum standards for the implementation of ILP and demand states better define what their Chafee programs offer to youth.
- d. Build a reference for implementing ILP that mirrors the Office of Child Care's guide to improve the application process and remove barriers to accessing child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).

- e. Issue guidance providing basic standards and quality measures for the living settings of a “Supervised Setting in Which a Child Lives Independently” for youth ages 18–21. The Children’s Bureau declined to provide any guidance when Fostering Connections was enacted and this new placement setting was developed. Guidance could help ensure that this setting is high quality, better prepares youth for the transition to adulthood, and addresses the challenge of youth being effectively homeless while in extended foster care.

4.) Improve case and transition planning services for youth exiting the foster care system.

- a. Provide detailed federal guidance on the requirements that youth participate in case planning and can identify individuals to participate in these meetings to support more meaningful participation.
- b. Require states to include details in their title IV-E and IV-B plans on how they will ensure meaningful participation of youth in case and transition planning.
- c. Publish guidance recommending states use title IV-E case management funding for specialized case management for older youth and more frequent sessions than monthly for older youth who are living in the community rather than in group homes, foster homes, etc.
- d. Provide guidance encouraging states to provide specialized case management for older youth and young adults utilizing workers who have the expertise, passion, and specialized training to prepare young people to successfully transition to adulthood.
- e. Require that states allow young people to select and drive all of the goals in their transition plans and require states to establish processes to ensure that young people are provided services and supports that align with their transition plan goals.
- f. Release guidance on best practices for building support teams for youth aging out of care.
- g. Clarify that costs related to preparing youth for meetings and providing transportation are eligible for title IV-E reimbursement.
- h. Provide increased oversight of state transition planning processes and the requirement to provide discharge documents, and offer technical assistance to states to improve these processes.

5.) Streamline processes to ensure transition-age youth can access services.

- a. Convene stakeholders and decision makers from all federal agencies that interact with transition-age youth (DOE, DOL, CMS, HUD, etc.) to streamline the applications, program requirements, and other needed information they collect from youth and provide a standardized entry point to coordinating supports for them.
- b. Issue guidance detailing best practices for making effective referrals for youth and encourage states to engage youth in the referral process from beginning to end. Include information about building partnerships with community providers.
- c. Release guidance to states about the best practices for asking youth what they need and tailoring services to the unique needs of each individual youth.

- d. Analyze federal guidance to see what rules and regulations may prevent transition-age youth from achieving success. One example of this is the rigid timeframes on housing and services for youth that often prevent or inhibit their ability to find stable and safe housing.
- e. Collaborate with offices like the Office of Homeless Services and mental health and therapeutic providers to develop a more cross-systems approach to transition-age youth services.
- f. Publish guidance on information sharing agreements between systems (CW and SNAP, TANF, JJ, etc.) to ensure effective communication and coordination of services.
- g. Establish a demonstration project grant to utilize smart technologies to automate and streamline the administration of services, document submissions, and eligibility checks.

6.) Improve the efficacy and reach of extended foster care programs.

- a. Convene a working group that includes people with lived experience in extended care to reimagine what foster care could look like past 18, so youth can get the support they need without feeling burdened by child welfare oversight.
- b. Provide technical assistance to states that do not have title IV-E extended foster care so all states extend care to age 21.
- c. Initiate research into the potential impacts of extending title IV-E foster care beyond age 21.
- d. Publish guidance around best practices for coupling specialized case management services with extended foster care.
- e. Clarify that title IV-E prevention services can be provided to young people ages 18–21 who are eligible for re-entry. Current guidance does not make this clear and is not consistent with the purpose of the law to prevent re-entry into foster care and keep young people with family.
- f. Provide guidance to states on creative ways the title IV-E prevention program can be used to support transition-age youth, specifically highlighting approaches states can take for considering youth older than age 18 as candidates for prevention services, beyond expectant and parenting youth.
- g. Publish new rules requiring all states to consider all young adults who exit care prior to their 21st birthday as “candidates for care” until age 21.
- h. Publish guidance highlighting state examples of approved candidacy definitions that include the 18+ population beyond expectant and parenting youth.
- i. Increase oversight of states’ extended care programs to ensure they are providing continued value for youth and not simply delaying poor outcomes of aging out.

7.) Improve K-12 education for foster youth.

- a. Clarify that the cost of educational advocacy, including advocacy related to school stability and the transition to postsecondary programs, can be funded with title IV-E administrative funds.
- b. Clarify that title IV-E administrative funds can be used for targeted educational case management.
- c. Disseminate guidance to states on effective practices to improve K-12 outcomes for foster youth (the focus is always on higher education but most foster youth are failed by the education system well before higher education).
- d. Collaborate with the Department of Education on new regulations to improve the outcomes and experiences of foster youth in K-12 education.
- e. Provide technical assistance on data and information sharing between child welfare and education agencies.
- f. Provide technical assistance to state and local education agencies on how best to serve foster youth in K-12 education.
- g. Release a data update on Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) compliance by states and educational outcomes for foster youth.

8.) Promote on-campus support programs to help prepare youth for success in postsecondary education.

- a. Develop demonstration grants that incentivize states to build and implement postsecondary pathways for transition-age youth beyond just tuition programs in 2-year, 4-year, and vocational schools.
- b. Initiate research into effective practices of campus support programs.
- c. Collaborate with DOE to provide technical assistance to universities interested in building foster youth support programs.
- d. Publish guidance encouraging states to require every institution of higher education receiving state funds to have a support program for foster youth.

9.) Improve the efficacy of Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV).

- a. Initiate research into the potential impact of increasing the maximum amount of ETV awards and of eliminating age requirements for the program.
- b. Collaborate with the Department of Education on strategies that protect ETV benefits from misuse by private, for-profit colleges.
- c. Issue guidance to states on how to streamline ETV eligibility so grants are awarded based on need and impact, not on who is best equipped to navigate the process.
- d. Enact new ETV rules that align more closely to Pell Grant standards such as limitations on whether states can impose additional eligibility restrictions and requiring direct disbursement of funds without expense verification.
- e. Create a more flexible academic progress standard. (Federal rules currently give states flexibility regarding how to measure satisfactory progress; however, most

default to institutionally-defined Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) standards. These standards disqualify more than one-third of students annually, with the greatest burden falling on students of color.) Create a federal standard that allows students who are struggling academically to receive funds for two years before they lose benefits, provided they have developed a plan to improve academic progress. Allow students who previously did not meet academic progress requirements who have been disenrolled to have ETV grants reinstated upon subsequent re-enrollment without precondition.

- f. Require all jurisdictions that receive ETV allocations to provide comprehensive data to the Children's Bureau, including the number of applications; number of awards made; number of applicants rejected and reasons for rejection; and average award amount. To monitor for equity considerations, metrics should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender.
- g. Convene state ETV administrators to come together and share their knowledge and expertise.
- h. Work collaboratively with the Department of Education to encourage states not to add additional requirements to the ETV program and bring them into closer alignment with Pell Grant requirements so students are not worried about accessing funds or submitting receipts and waiting for reimbursement.
- i. Encourage the Department of Education to implement a more flexible academic progress standard, at least in the first year of higher education, to allow youth time to adapt to the rigorous coursework.
- j. Require all jurisdictions that receive ETV allocations to provide comprehensive data on how they are utilized.

10.) Collaborate with the Department of Education to highlight the educational needs of foster youth.

- a. Weigh in on the Higher Education Act reauthorization process to ensure it accounts for the unique needs of foster youth.
- b. Collaborate with the Department of Education to ensure foster youth are considered in the DOE appropriations bill.
- c. Work with the DOE to advocate for special consideration for foster youth in federal student loan forgiveness plans.

11.) Help states improve their practices for educating foster youth.

- a. Disseminate guidance to help states improve financial education programs directly related to student loans and the consequences youth suffer from lack of ability to pay.
- b. Publish guidance encouraging all states to have higher education tuition waivers for former foster youth and disseminate information on the impact within states that have waived tuition.
- c. Publish guidance elevating practices for ensuring education seat hours/credits for timely graduation.

System Practices

1.) Encourage effective grievance processes for youth in care.

- a. Publish guidance elevating best practices for creating grievance filing processes.
- b. Provide technical assistance to states regarding training about grievance processes.
- c. Publish clear, direct guidance for states and counties about grievance processes to ensure youth are aware of the process, have access to it, and that there is genuine follow up after a claim is made.

2.) Establish practices to prevent the abuse and neglect of youth while in care.

- a. Publish guidance detailing best practices for preventing abuse and neglect of youth while in care.
- b. Increase oversight and penalties for states that fail to respond to youth allegations of abuse and neglect while in care.
- c. Publish statistics that allow communities to hold states accountable for decreasing the number of youth allegations of abuse and neglect while in care.

3.) Ensure that youth in care know and understand their rights.

- a. Publish guidance on best practices for establishing processes that help youth understand their rights upon entering care and at regular intervals during their time in care.
- b. Require states' title IV-E and IV-B plans provide details on the process by which youth aged 14 and older are provided their list of rights as required in 42 U.S.C. 675a(b) and provided the youth-friendly grievance policy in place to respond to any concerns.

4.) Expand legal representation for youth interacting with the child welfare system.

- a. Allow title IV-E administrative funds to be used to provide civil legal services to foster youth and families to address ancillary issues related to care (housing, immigration, etc). This was proposed for children and families in the President's FY 2023 budget request.
- b. Clarify that title IV-E may be used for legal advocacy for educational purposes, including special education advocacy.
- c. Collaborate with the Department of Justice around legal representation. Clarify in federal guidance that youth having client-directed legal counsel (not just a Guardian Ad Litem) is important to permanency advocacy and engaging youth in planning, and that this expense is eligible for title IV-E reimbursement.
- d. Initiate research into methods for providing civil legal representation for foster youth beyond extended foster care.
- e. Provide technical assistance to states to increase the uptake of legal representation for youth and families under title IV-E.

5.) Ensure that child welfare courts are adequately consulting with transition-age youth.

- a. Amend previous guidance to clarify that “consultation” does not require in-person consultation for the purposes of consulting with foster youth about their care.
- b. Clarify in guidance that judges must consult directly with youth in court.

6.) Improve the treatment of youth at the intersection of the child welfare and justice systems.

- a. Collaborate with the DOJ on guidance for state justice systems to allow leniency for youth following time in the child welfare system.
- b. Publish guidance on best practices for programming for youth that need a second (or third chance after age 18, particularly when it comes to eligibility for services.

7.) Increase and improve the use of evidence-based practices for transition-age youth.

- a. Require evaluation for formula-funded programs instead of just demonstration grants.
- b. Expand definitions of what constitutes an appropriate evaluation plan, since the current definitions used by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse discriminate against the development and implementation of culturally relevant programming.

8.) Promote engagement of lived experience in policy and practice.

- a. Require the meetings of the Federal Interagency Work Group on Child Abuse and Neglect to be open to the public and allow youth to propose topics and present at the quarterly meetings.
- b. Increase the number and regularity of structured listening sessions and other activities where the Children’s Bureau engages directly with young people to learn what transition-age youth want and what they identify as their needs and priorities.
- c. Engage in a public awareness campaign to help transition-age youth understand the role of the Children’s Bureau, the agency’s authority, and how youth can be involved in advancing CB priorities.
- d. Intentionally collaborate with marginalized communities to build programs that are specifically targeted to support their members in that area.
- e. Clarify that title IV-E administrative funds can be used for peer support and youth engagement activities.
- f. Provide demonstration funds for peer support programs so youth exiting the foster care system can become advocates on their own behalf.

9.) Improve the capacity of the child welfare workforce to support transition-age youth.

- a. Provide technical assistance to states on methods for training staff and holding the workforce accountable.
- b. Publish guidance and provide technical assistance to help states implement trauma-informed staff training so youth don’t feel punished for not having the placement or stability they need.

- c. Develop model youth-centered trainings to enhance skills for staff working on behalf of transition-age youth. These trainings must actively involve young people impacted by the system.
- d. Publish guidance detailing best practices for delivering training in a youth-centered way so youth can engage with staff during training and provide technical assistance to implement. This would mean training needs to be delivered in a youth-centered way. We see this as critical so youth are also aware of any changes and can engage with staff during the trainings and ask questions.

10.) Help states maintain continuity of caseworkers for youth in care.

- a. Publish guidance detailing best practices for preventing turnover of caseworkers in the child welfare system.
- b. Provide demonstration funds to states to determine best practices for increasing the longevity of the child welfare workforce.

11.) Improve the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

- a. Clarify the new AFCARS elements for states, remind them why they are important to collect, and inform them of any sanctions associated with lack of compliance.
- b. Fix the AFCARS child's sex field to be inclusive.
- c. Change the language in AFCARS to more accurately reflect the diversity in our communities.
- d. Eliminate the terms "long term foster care" and "emancipation" from AFCARS as case plan goals as they do not reflect case or permanency planning goals.

12.) Create systems to collect and disseminate outcomes data from foster care.

- a. Create guidance for Congress about creating a new structure for tracking youth outcomes, including data on homelessness, incarceration, parenthood, and future child welfare involvement that is tracked until age 35 or later.
- b. Provide guidance to states on processes for continuously tracking youths' job statuses, housing situations, and other measures for how they are adjusting to adulthood.
- c. Publish guidance on strategies to collaborate with non-governmental entities such as service providers, faith-based organizations, community organizations, MCOs, and others to collect data from youth after they leave care.
- d. Determine and publish guidance about methods to collect more anecdotal and qualitative data on transition-age youth overall, particularly on outcomes for youth in the foster care and justice systems. This should include significant issues not captured in AFCARS like moving in and out of the system, adoption dissolutions, aging out, placement instability, and other significant systematic challenges that need to be addressed.

Grateful for this
opportunity. Meeting
People with Similar
Back grounds.