



**NGA Center for Best Practices  
Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care Initiative  
National Experts' Roundtable  
Friday, May 20, 2005**

***Meeting Summary***

The NGA Center for Best Practices convened the *National Experts' Roundtable on Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care* on Friday, May 20, 2005. Experts at the daylong meeting identified key elements and strategies in a comprehensive state system that assists older foster youth in successfully transitioning to adulthood. The experts hailed from many areas that connect to youth aging out of the foster care system, including child welfare, juvenile justice, health and mental health, education, employment, housing, independent living, and other research and advocacy areas.

Susan Golonka of NGA began the meeting and introduced Dr. Mark Courtney of the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children. His new research on foster youth after age 18 in the Midwest was just released the day before at a briefing to policymakers on Capitol Hill. The report detailed the second cohort of foster youth ages 18-19 in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin and found that foster youth at age 19 are worse off than their same-age peers. In addition, youth who remained in the foster care system after age 18 fared better than those who did not. On a whole, those youth remaining in state custody after 18 were more likely to be further along in their education, have stable housing, stay out of the juvenile justice system, receive more independent living services, and have greater access to health and mental health services. A third cohort of the study will occur at ages 21 and 22, and Dr. Courtney will further examine the impact of services to these foster youth on social, economic and health outcomes.

Dr. Peter Pecora of Casey Family Programs provided additional information on research findings regarding youth aging out of foster care from his study in Oregon and Washington. The study examined former foster youth up to age 24 in a snapshot from Oregon and Washington and involved 659 case record reviews and 459 interviews. As in Dr. Courtney's study, Dr. Pecora's research offered insight on the status of the foster youth studied compared to the wider population. He found high incidences of post-traumatic stress disorder among other mental health problems, that many are enrolled in vocational or higher education but have low completion rates, and that one third are at or below poverty line and in fragile economic situations. Some alumni, however, are doing well, and it is necessary to determine the programmatic factors that are responsible for this success, such as educational and broad independent living supports.

Gary Stangler of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative then spoke to the group about how connections and support from a caring adult – a foster parent, mentor, relative, or case manager – can make the difference in success for foster youth. Educational, employment, and social skills are also needed to achieve economic success. Youth leadership plays a key

role in the development of foster kids and can be a life-altering experience when they are able to exert this leadership to affect policy and program change.

Three former foster youth – Mary, Jessica, and Edward – all provided an overview of their personal stories and key aspects of the foster care system that did or could have made a difference for them as they were transitioning to adulthood. Mary talked about her experience of looking for a family and the support and love she needed from them. Her foster family did not want to adopt her as she would not receive the educational benefits afforded to kids at the time who were aging out of the system. Therefore, Mary's foster family would not be able to meet the costs of going to college. In the end, Mary's case worker adopted her one week before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and she got her wish of a permanent, loving, stable home and family life. Jessica felt that her biological family needed better support from publicly funded services that could have prevented her from being placed in foster care. She felt that a more extensive interview in the beginning with her and her family may have averted so much of the upheaval and turmoil she experienced. Jessica advocates for youth having a greater voice in making decisions that affect foster youths' lives. Edward discussed his perspective on the poor communications that still exist within the child welfare system as well as with other systems that touch their lives, especially the public school system. This lack of internal communication among systems often compounds already traumatic situations for youth while in the foster care system. Improvements such as allowing foster parents some guardianship rights may affect how foster youth are treated.

Ms. Golonka then presented NGA's vision of a comprehensive state system that served as one of the stepping stones for the meeting's facilitated discussions. The vision outlined several potential components to a state system that serves youth aging out of foster care, including definition of the target population served by the system, intended system outcomes, partners involved in the system, and goals for the improved system. The target group for this system is foster youth ages 14-25 who are transitioning to adulthood. Outcomes desired for the target group include connected to adults and the community, living independently and well (health, financial, housing), engaged in productive employment, and achieving educational goals. The vision also offered potential partners for the system in education, employment and training, health care, mental health, judicial, child welfare, housing, independent living, juvenile justice, and employers. The improved system would provide comprehensive and coordinated services, easy access to programs and be navigable, expanded access to services with priorities and set-asides, and linkages and protocol for referrals with transitions between systems. This is just a start to conceptualizing what a comprehensive state system would look like.

To show how one state put vision into practice, Amanda Singer from the Utah Department of Human Services provided attendees with an overview of her state's efforts to create a vision and implement a plan to better serve youth aging out of foster care. They created an implementation team chartered by the Governor and included child and family services, workforce, education, health, economic development, and the Governor's office. The team started with task groups in each area: employment and education, housing, life skills, mentoring, physical and mental health, transportation, and a website to disseminate info to youth. The first administrative accomplishment was partnering with workforce services, which were mandated to serve this population. Utah established the group as a WIA priority and developed local pathways which were referral paths to get older and former foster kids into WIA services. The team then engaged local and state councils, investigated education and training vouchers, conducted marketing and training for staff, and identified administrative duplication.

Future work in Utah to assist older foster youth will strengthen these partnerships, more effectively use existing resources, and develop new resources that reach these kids.

In the latter part of the morning, participants separated into two groups of experts each to discuss the key elements in a comprehensive state system that serve foster youth aging out of the system. Key elements identified included economic and educational success, strong leadership, accountability for outcomes, youth engagement, permanency, quality healthcare, support to youth after age 18, and improved system efficiency and capacity.<sup>1</sup>

After lunch, participants again broke into four topical groups to explore programs, strategies, challenges and best practices to inform states' efforts to create a comprehensive, cross-system approach to serving youth in their transition to adulthood. The experts were grouped by the following topical areas – workforce and education, child welfare/independent living/juvenile justice, child welfare/independent living/housing, and health/behavioral health. The groups brainstormed various programs and resources that would be involved in a comprehensive state system, potential strategies in making such a system successful, understanding roadblocks that states may face, and examples of effective state and local practices that encompass and streamline services to youth aging out of foster care. Each group then reported back to the entire group near the end of the day. Strategies developed included:

- **Workforce and Education:** establishing a state report card on vulnerable youth; offering public post-secondary tuition waivers in all states; creating better opportunities for asset development; prioritizing services to foster youth at One-Stop centers; and developing internship, work and employer pipelines.
- **Child Welfare, Independent Living and Housing:** offering tax relief or other incentives to landlords of foster youth; engaging local business and community organizations to invest in foster youth's stability and success within their community; and funding residential providers to develop staff-supervised housing for foster youth with disabilities.
- **Child Welfare, Independent Living and Juvenile Justice:** enacting policies that address overlaps in child welfare and juvenile justice systems; ensuring that foster youth have a job coach or mentor in their lives; providing a comprehensive assessment to youth in both systems; developing a unified court with juvenile justice and dependency; and creating a youth-driven transition planning team for each youth in care while avoiding duplicative plans.
- **Health and Behavioral Health:** using Medicaid and child mental health systems to better serve foster youth and potentially prevent entry into foster care system; serving older foster youth through school-based or teen health centers; identifying disabilities early on for improved planning for care; and examining barriers to meet special health/mental health care needs.

Common strategies across all of the groups incorporated better data collection and sharing, extension of state custody to 21, improved post-permanency services and supports, expansion of Medicaid to age 21, flexible funding, and active partnerships across all points in a comprehensive state system.

Ms. Golonka concluded the roundtable by thanking the group for their attendance and announced NGA's next steps. From the day's input from experts in the field, NGA will generate several efforts to help states develop a comprehensive array of services and programs to meet

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the attached document of the key elements to a comprehensive state system to serve youth transitioning out of foster care.

the needs of these foster youth. These efforts include an NGA policy brief on youth aging out of foster care, a workshop for all states, and a policy academy to provide technical assistance to selected states on creating an effective and coordinated system to serve this population. Per the ongoing plans to address this topic, NGA will likely draw on the experts' knowledge as it proceeds in making these efforts to help states in effectively serving youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

# The Top Elements of an Effective, Comprehensive, and Integrated State Approach to Serving Youth Aging Out of Foster Care – *Based on the morning's facilitated discussion*

*\*Indicates One of Top 6 Priority Elements Designated by Each Group*

## **Group 1:**

1. *\*Economic Success for Youth (19)*
  - Maximizing high school diplomas.
  - Having an Opportunity Passport.
  - Partnering with workforce system that streamlines WIA eligibility and recalibrates performance measures
  - Focusing on education (staying in school...)
  - Making every effort to keep youth in same schools, even with a placement change.
  - Providing free tuition.
  - Advocating for a variety of early educational programs.
  - Having high expectations for our youth.
  - Improving information sharing when foster youth change schools.
  - Offering early supported job and volunteer opportunities.
  - Extending educational rights/supports to foster youth (i.e., McKinney-Vento).
  
2. *\*Strong, Visionary Leadership Engaging Multiple Stakeholders (8)*
  - Aligning policy in state.
  - Having visionary leadership.
  - Partnering with key businesses, state business leaders, and local business leaders.
  - Tapping into local universities, colleges, community/junior colleges (public & private).
  - Creating statewide vision, not just local.
  - Creating a collective vision of success.
  - Engaging entire community.
  - Tapping into faith community (state and local leaders).
  - Tapping housing resources partners (Section 8, HOME, Housing Finance Administration).
  
3. *\*Shared Accountability for Outcomes, Especially Community Outcomes Across Systems (8)*
  - Ensuring excellent, results-driven group homes.
  - Supporting flexible funding so services are matched to need.
  - Building systems with shared responsibility common outcomes for shared populations.
  - Conducting follow-up studies to know how you are doing.
  - Paying attention to race and gender patterns in service provision and outcomes.
  - Focusing on outcomes.

- Creating a coalition amongst all stakeholders/agencies to share accountability.
  - Sharing accountability for multiple outcomes.
  - Establishing clear and measurable youth outcomes to achieve.
4. *\*Engage Youth Authentically and Genuinely (6)*
- Providing Access to all “normal” developmental activities.
  - Offering youth development and leadership opportunities.
  - Developing a nationwide handbook for youth entering care.
  - Instilling the voice of youth in system as independent advocates.
  - Creating a youth-driven/centered approach (listen & be responsive).
5. *\*Supportive Community (6)*
- Having the flexibility to meet local community needs.
  - Focusing on pre-care services for families.
  - Making foster care as “cool” as adoption.
  - Promoting increased family and community based placements and services. (Reduced reliance on residential and group care b/c it’s easier than finding and supporting families.)
  - Expanding “restorative justice” models to restore a place in communities – community reintegration.
  - Building connections within communities (rather than programs/services).
6. *\*All Children Have Safe, Stable, Loving Family or Permanent Connections (15)*
- Allowing the space and time for youth just to enjoy life.
  - Educating youth and foster care system on adoption choices.
  - Granting foster parents right to guardianship in certain situations (federal & state policy).
  - Providing permanent mentors from age 14, i.e., Big Brothers/Big Sisters.
  - Enacting a federal or state sibling policy (making every effort to keep siblings in the same community if not the same home).
  - Believing in adoption as an option (for older youth).
  - Engaging family effectively at all stages of child welfare practice.
  - Helping kids who want to contact birth parents do it in as healthy a way as possible.
  - Committing to find a permanent connection to a caring adult or adults for every youth.
  - Creating permanent connections and opportunities for family-finding efforts.
7. *Every Child Has Access to Quality Health and Mental Healthcare until 21 (2)*
- Accessing comprehensive medical mental health services accessible to parents, foster parents and youth.
  - Extending Medicaid to 21 or above.
  - Preventing early childbirths (teen pregnancy).
8. *Improve Administrative Efficiency and Capacity for Kids in the System (4)*
- Starting transition planning when youth enter care.
  - Integrating units for youth permanency and preparation for adulthood – not separate silos.
  - Providing E-Passport to youth.

- Determining early eligibility for adult services.
  - Training caseworkers to know about available resources for youth over 18 (sometimes falls through the cracks due to turnover, etc.).
9. *Based on Evidence, Support Youth Longer.*
- Extending care to age 23.
  - Changing state law(s) to support child protective services youth through age 21.
  - Adding staff to case manage youth post-age 18 through age 21.

## **Group 2:**

1. *\*Cross-System and Community Responsibility*
  - Educating community to garner support for youth.
  - Engaging in cross-system partnerships.
  - Supporting legislative mandates that provide clear definitive roles of each agency.
  - Gaining support of faith-based community.
  - Partnering with agencies.
  - Enhancing caregiver role and involvement.
  - Ensuring that all systems on board.
  - Including Healthy and Ready to Work as partner.
  - Linking state planning efforts.
  - Linking juvenile justice.
  - Involving adult systems.
  - Creating awareness about services/resources.
  - Making all relevant services available.
  - Simplifying eligibility for services.
  - Integrating state transition planning with PIP.
  - Accessing systems for permanency training.
2. *\*Accepting Parental Role into Adulthood*
  - Starting early for transitional services.
  - Ensuring youth-driven planning.
  - Creating opportunities for normalcy for youth.
  - Developing vision for youth (beyond foster care).
  - Extending full foster care services to 21.
  - Creating policy so state accepts parental responsibility for child.
  - Providing an “in and out” option for youth.
  - Avoiding disruption of caring at 18.
3. *\*Seamless Educational Continuum*
  - Partnering with education through universities.
  - Creating a seamless educational continuum.
  - Setting aside funding in Title I for mentoring.
  - Paying attention to education/special education earlier.

4. *\*State Outcomes and Accountability*
  - Integrating data and funding.
  - Accessing information.
  - Projecting and tracking costs and benefits.
  - Establishing accountability and outcomes.
  - Tracking outcomes.
5. *\*Youth Empowerment, Engagement and Advocacy*
  - Empowering youth as leaders/decision makers.
  - Creating vision for youth.
  - Educating youth and creating opportunities to advocate on their own behalf.
  - Including non-college bound youth in service planning.
  - Using youth as trainers.
6. *\*Permanency and Connections for All Youth*
  - Offering a permanency program.
  - Finding funding for kinship care.
  - Networking.
  - Making clear that independent living is not permanency option.
  - Including extended family.
  - Creating the authority and framework of permanency for older youth.
  - Utilizing a family-centered practice.
  - Ensuring that youth have a caring adult in their lives.
7. *Assets, Income and Employment*
  - Having the opportunity to build assets.
8. *Sufficiency and Flexibility of Resources*
  - Encouraging supported guardianship.
  - Extending access to aftercare support.
  - Supporting flexibility in funding streams.
  - Increasing federal IV-E funding for foster care system.
  - Offering more state funded initiatives to provide services through collaborations/partnerships.
9. *Comprehensiveness and Continuity in Health/Behavioral Healthcare*
  - Providing health insurance beyond 18.
  - Prioritizing the health of youth.
  - Offering a youth medical passport.
10. *Strengthening Capacity, Competency and Stability*
  - Ensuring staff and caregiver competency and capacity.
  - Mandating and training permanency and independent living services.
  - Offering more support for caseworkers.
  - Providing awareness and education around services, supports and resources.

*11. Safe and Affordable Housing for All Youth*

- Offering statewide transitional housing.
- Creating policy prohibiting discharge to homelessness.
- Supporting intergenerational housing.

*12. Leadership and Urgency from the Top*

- Recognizing the need for leadership from the Governor and Chief Justice.
- Ensuring the Governor's leadership.
- Creating urgency around changing the system.