



SUPPORTING YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE IN TEXAS

*Youth and Staff Perspectives on
Barriers and Opportunities*

In partnership with

 **Youth** VILLAGES®
The force for families

Foreword

This report is built on the experiences and insights of 205 young adults who aged out of foster care across Texas. To each of you who participated in our convenings, thank you for sharing your experiences and ideas and helping us understand what needs to change. We are equally grateful to the more than 120 frontline staff who joined these conversations and shared candid reflections about your work supporting young people through this challenging transition.

To our advisory group members: those with lived foster care experience and representatives from the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs), Supervised Independent Living (SIL) programs, Preparation for Adult Living (PAL), and transition centers. Thank you for connecting us with staff and young adults in your communities and providing feedback on our work. A special thank you to Alina White, who oversees the Extended Foster Care program at DFPS, for connecting us with providers and young adults statewide and providing strategic guidance and support throughout this project.

About The Center and Our Partnership with Youth Villages

The Center is committed to improving outcomes for children, youth, and families involved in Texas' child welfare system. Through research, technical assistance, and collaborative partnerships, we work to strengthen the systems designed to protect and support some of our state's most vulnerable young people.

This project was made possible through a systems impact grant from Youth Villages, a non-profit dedicated to helping children with emotional and behavioral challenges and their families live successfully. Youth Villages' LifeSet model stood out as an evidence-based approach that meets young adults where they are, providing individualized case management through the transition out of foster care. Its strength lies in continuity of care, reduced caseloads enabling genuine relationships, and structured support adapting to each young person's needs. This framework encouraged us to explore the gaps and challenges that could be addressed through intensive case management and other systemic opportunities.

About This Report

What follows are not prescriptive solutions, but opportunities for consideration and development. These opportunities are meant to spark innovation and collaboration among SSCCs, DFPS, providers, community partners, and policymakers.

Texas' transition to Community-Based Care creates opportunity to reimagine support for transition-age youth. This report encourages system-wide collaboration, centers youth voices, and promotes strategies to ensure every young person leaving foster care has the supports, relationships, and opportunities needed to thrive.

The young adults we spoke with told us what was possible. This report honors their vision and offers a path forward.

For questions or more information about this work, please contact Valerie Hallam at vhallam@tacfs.org.

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INTRODUCTION

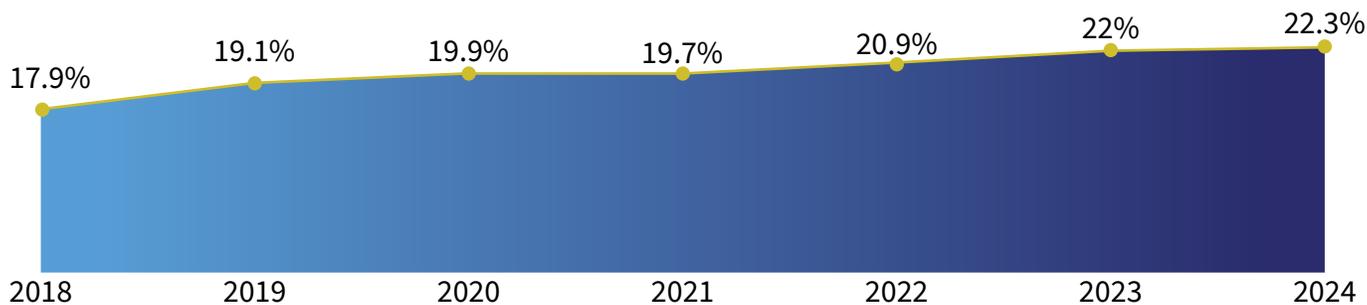
For decades, research has documented poor outcomes for young people aging out of care: high rates of homelessness, unemployment, mental health struggles, and justice system involvement. Federal programs like the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (established in 1999) and Education and Training Vouchers (authorized in 2001) were created to address these challenges. Through the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, Texas implemented Extended Foster Care (EFC), a voluntary program for youth ages 18-21 (or up to 22 if still in high school). The program offers continued foster care placement and support to facilitate the transition to independence, provided youth get an approved placement and meet eligibility requirements related to education, employment, or workforce preparation.

While poor outcomes for youth aging out of care are not new, and federal and state programs have been developed in response, several factors continue to compound these challenges. The child welfare landscape evolves continuously, as do economic conditions including housing markets, employment opportunities, and cost of living, yet the financial structures underlying many support programs remain unchanged since their inception. Young people aging out of foster care continue to face many barriers to safety and stability after leaving care, and in many cases, their outcomes have gotten worse over time instead of better.

Why Now?

Each year for the last decade, approximately 800-1,200 youth in Texas age out of foster care. These numbers represent young people navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood while managing the complexities of system involvement and the instability that often accompanies foster care. Although fewer children and families enter care every year, the percentage of older youth entering care is increasing, their needs are greater than ever before, and the rate at which youth emancipate from foster care without legal permanency has increased.^{1,2}

**Children in Substitute Care on August 31:
Percentage of Youth Age 14-17**

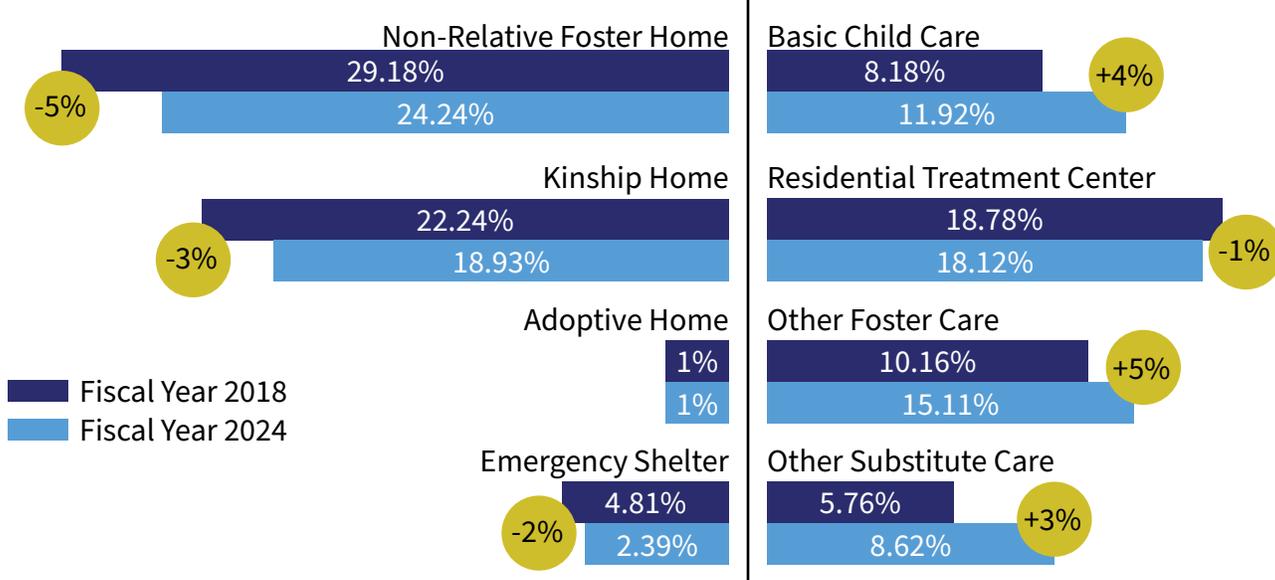


Placement data provides insight into the level of support transition-age youth require. When youth are in more restrictive settings, it typically indicates higher or more complex needs. Since 2018, placements in less restrictive settings decreased while more restrictive placements increased. Basic childcare settings, congregate care facilities that serve youth with foundational needs but lack a family-like environment, increased by 4%. More significantly, “other foster care” and “other substitute care” placements rose by 5% and 3% respectively. These categories capture youth in psychiatric facilities, Texas Juvenile Justice Department settings, and those who are missing or have run away, generally reflecting higher acuity populations.

¹ Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, “CPS Placements: Children in Substitute Care on August 31,” https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Placements/Substitute_Care_on_Aug_31.asp

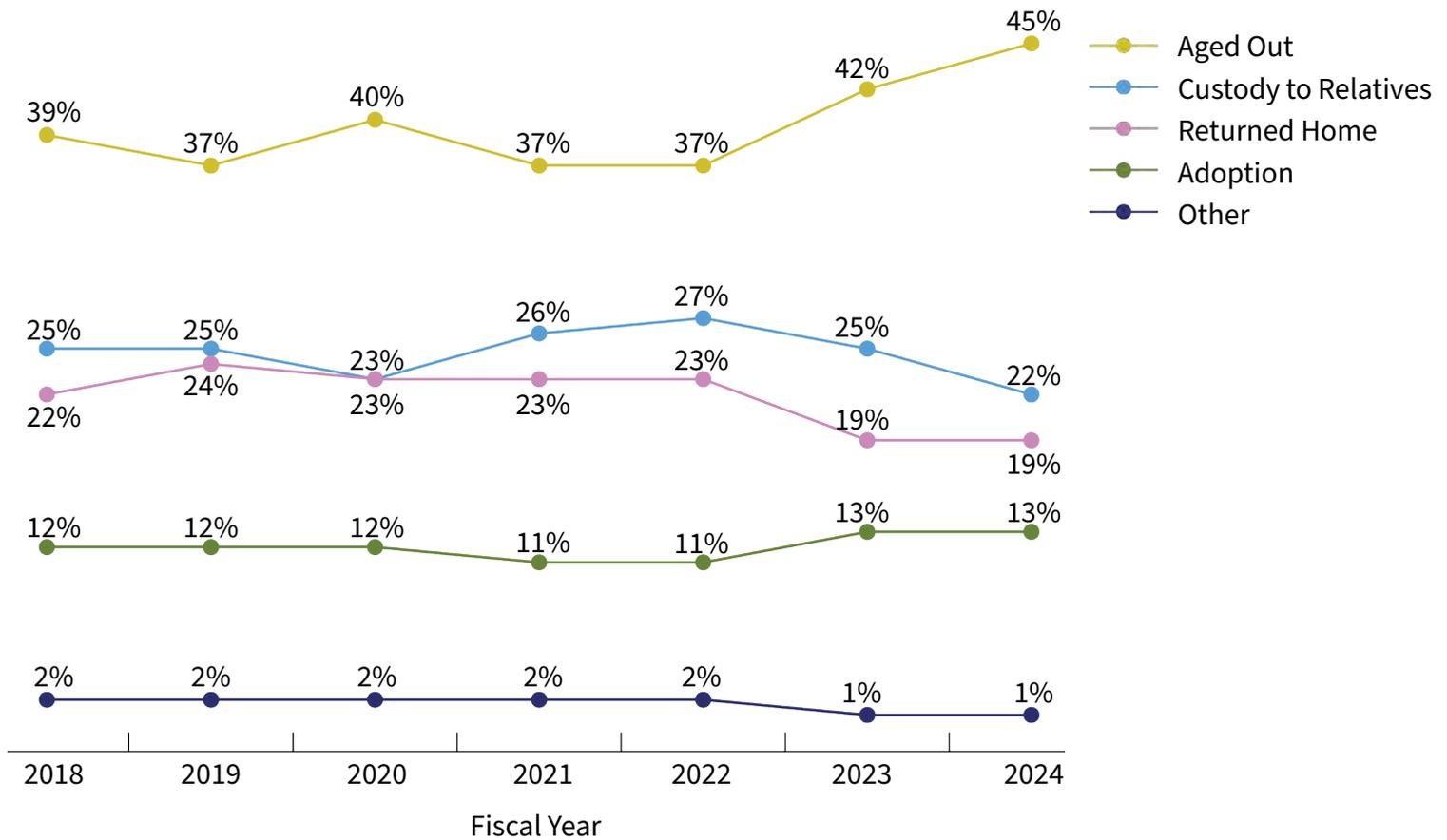
² Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, “Child Protective Services (CPS) Conservatorship: Children Exiting DFPS Legal Custody,” https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Conservatorship/Exits.asp

Youth Age 14-17 in Substitute Care on August 31 by Living Arrangement



Nearly half of youth who exit care are emancipated; this has been trending up since 2022.

Exits for Youth Age 14 and Older by Exit Type



What did we do?

Between May and September 2025, the Center, in partnership with Youth Villages, gathered input through:

- 8 in-person convenings (Houston, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Harlingen, Tyler, and El Paso)
- 1 virtual convening (including participants from Lubbock, Midland, and Abilene)
- Attendance: 205 young adults (ages 18-26) who aged out of foster care and 120+ frontline staff
- Advisory group: Members with lived foster care experience, plus representatives from the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs), Supervised Independent Living (SIL) programs, Preparation for Adult Living (PAL), and transition centers. This group provided feedback on scope of work, activities, and final report, and connected our team with staff and young adults in their communities.

These convenings were intentionally designed as conversations to capture authentic lived experiences and create opportunities for connection.

Key questions explored:

With Young Adults:

- What challenges and barriers did you face aging out of foster care?
- If you were redesigning services, what would you want?
- What does successful adult living look like to you?
- What influenced your decision about EFC?

With Frontline Staff:

- What are your goals for the young people you serve?
- What needs do you observe?
- What challenges do you face in meeting those needs?
- What resources would help you do your job better?

Since 2014, Texas has been transforming its foster care system through Community-Based Care (CBC), a privatized model of child welfare service delivery that transfers case management and placement responsibilities to regional contractors. Implementation has occurred in phases, with regions across the state at different stages of CBC adoption. While some areas are fully operating under CBC, others are actively transitioning, and statewide implementation is expected by 2029. This restructuring presents new opportunities to address longstanding barriers facing transition-age youth. Successfully transitioning youth to adulthood, whether through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or emancipation, is both a core child welfare responsibility and a broader social imperative.

What follows reflects what we learned, not just about challenges, but about opportunities for those supporting this population to ensure youth successfully transition to adulthood. While policies and procedures exist to prevent many of the barriers identified, feedback from young adults and staff indicates that these supports are often not working as intended. Some opportunities highlighted in this report aim to strengthen existing systems, while others suggest new strategies. Using these insights, alongside data and existing research on foster youth outcomes, opportunities in this report are designed to be considered and further developed by SSCCs, DFPS, providers, community partners, and policymakers at all levels. While approaches may differ across communities and regions, the goal is to encourage system-wide collaboration, center the voices of young people with lived experience, and promote innovative strategies to support this population.



SUMMARY OF KEY OPPORTUNITIES

Across Texas, we spoke with 205 young adults and more than 120 staff about the transition from foster care to independence. Despite policies and programs intended to prevent common barriers, young adults consistently reported experiences that fell short of these expectations, and staff described challenges caused by gaps in infrastructure, resources, and coordination. These conversations revealed opportunities to both strengthen existing supports that are not functioning as intended and implement new, innovative approaches. The following summary highlights the key barriers youth and young adults face and actionable opportunities to improve outcomes for those aging out of foster care in Texas.

Redesign and Increase Participation in Extended Foster Care

Only 48% of eligible youth enroll in Extended Foster Care (EFC), and time in care averages one year or less. There are major gaps in awareness and education about the EFC program across the system, and many young adults never learn about it. Even among those who do enroll, the age 21 cutoff forces young adults to transition out before achieving the stability markers typical of their peers, who often receive family support well into their twenties.

Opportunities:

- The Extended Foster Care age limit should be raised to 26, providing ongoing access to housing, education, healthcare, and employment support rather than replicating foster care structures for older adults.
- A comprehensive information campaign should be launched targeting providers and the entire care network, as young adults across all regions said “nobody told me,” with information provided by age 16 through multiple channels. The program name should be changed from “Extended Foster Care” and repositioned as a bridge to independence, as the current name is “a turn-off” creating stigma.
- An opt-out enrollment model should be explored where eligible youth are automatically enrolled unless they choose to leave.
- Expand EFC eligibility to include young adults not currently in approved foster care placements, ensuring continued access to housing, education, and support services.

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Develop Life Skills for Independent Living

The Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program provides life-skills training to youth ages 14-21 in foster care or recently aged out. Mandated by DFPS and delivered through local providers and SSCCs under CBC, PAL prepares youth for independence through education in financial literacy, employment, housing, healthcare, and daily living skills. Despite 92.1% of youth completing required PAL training, completion does not translate to readiness. Youth age out lacking basic self-care skills, interpersonal competencies, and experience navigating adult responsibilities, leaving them unprepared for independent or unsupervised living.

Opportunities:

- Redefine PAL workers as transition experts with reduced caseloads, increased compensation, and comprehensive tools to coordinate across all systems. Shift from checking boxes to ensuring youth-led pathways to stability where every young person has a realistic plan with relationships and supports to sustain it.
- Support young people with higher levels of needs with evidence-based intensive case management models like LifeSet to support PAL workers, caseworkers, and SIL programs with structured, individualized approaches that meet young adults where they are and ensure continuity of care during and after transitions.
- Modernize PAL training with experiential learning through youth-designed curriculum, simulations, and more practice opportunities that teach the “why” and “how” behind life skills.
- Equip foster homes and Residential Treatment Centers (RTC) with specific tools, training, and financial support for youth skill-building. Integrate normalcy principles across all placement types and create alternative skill-building pathways when placements don’t feel safe for practice.

3

Ensure Youth Leave Care with Essential Documentation

Documentation emerged as one of the most frequently discussed barriers across all convenings with young adults and staff. Without IDs, young adults cannot work, enroll in school, open bank accounts, or rent apartments.

Opportunities:

- Establish dedicated regional documentation liaisons to expedite processes, troubleshoot barriers, and ensure the documentation process begins early with database tracking and deadline alerts.
- Expand eligibility for Form 2042 (Foster Care Residency Verification) to include young adults not in paid placements after age 18.
- Deliver comprehensive education to all youth starting at age 14 on how to obtain documents, their rights to free documents, required forms, and how to advocate for themselves if documents are not provided.

4

Help Youth Build Strong Relationships and Support Networks

Youth leave care without support systems due to sibling separation, placement instability, and high staff turnover. The child welfare system prioritizes legal permanency over relational permanency, undervaluing the meaningful connections youth need to thrive. Having at least one safe, committed, enduring adult connection is one of the strongest predictors of long-term success for youth aging out of foster care.

Opportunities:

- Reduce caseloads to enable staff to build genuine relationships with young people and invest more in mental health support, self-care, and resilience training for staff experiencing burnout and secondary trauma.
- Ensure sibling contact is a priority and never used as punishment or reward. Support sibling visits during EFC and provide spaces and support for young adults who want siblings to visit or live with them.
- Provide education and extensive support on healthy ways to reconnect with biological families and navigate complex family dynamics, valuing relational permanency in all its forms.

5

Repair Broken Education Pathways

Only 51% of former foster youth in Texas have a diploma or GED by age 19. Those who complete high school struggle with post-secondary education because many don't learn about Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) until after aging out.

Opportunities:

- Increase access and awareness by providing early, youth-friendly ETV information through schools, peers, and social media, with dedicated FAFSA support to reduce barriers.
- Broaden ETV eligibility to include short-term, non-traditional, or innovative trade programs aligned with workforce needs.
- Safeguard foster youth from credit loss, grade penalties, or graduation delays due to placement-related school changes.

6

Remove Barriers to Employment

Youth enter adulthood with zero work experience. By age 21, less than half have employment.

Opportunities:

- Work experience opportunities should be created while youth are still in care through paid internships, summer employment, apprenticeships, and skilled trades pathways with living wages.
 - Provide actual work experience, not just classroom training, including career exploration across industries, workplace expectations and soft skills training, job shadowing, mentorship programs, and employment-focused financial literacy covering paychecks, taxes, and benefits. Include job coaching and retention support for 6-12 months after hire.
- Transportation pilots should be launched and driver's education funding restored, with a state-insurance partnership created to address the premium crisis making car insurance unaffordable.

Stabilize Housing and Prevent Homelessness

Youth face critical housing barriers with both in-care and out-of-care options, leaving them seeking help from homeless service organizations rather than the foster care system.

Opportunities:

- Deliver clear, consistent, step-by-step housing information through multiple trusted channels so all youth understand eligibility, timelines, and application processes.
- Increase and stabilize financial supports including emergency funds, deposits, and rental assistance to bridge gaps between care and self-sufficiency.
- Expand housing and aftercare programs across underserved and rural regions, supporting young adults who wish to return to hometowns with stronger personal networks.
- Strengthen SIL quality, ensure tailored case management and regional access, and expand safe, specialized housing for high-need populations.
- Build tailored housing and services for young adults who are undocumented, those with disabilities, young parents, justice-involved, and trafficking survivors.
- Develop transitional living programs for 18 and older that bridge the gap between foster care and supervised independent living, allowing young adults to remain under the same program and case management team while progressing from more supervised settings to fully independent living arrangements.
- Create independent oversight through a lived experience-led ombudsman system to ensure safety, accountability, and responsiveness across programs that serve those over the age of 18.
- Increase funding and housing options for Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers to ensure more young adults aging out of foster care can access stable, affordable housing, and strengthen support services funding to provide the wraparound case management and stabilization supports that help young adults maintain housing successfully.

7

8

Expand and Improve Mental Health Supports

Over half of adolescents in the child welfare system have diagnosed mental health conditions, yet many distrust therapists due to frequent provider turnover, lack of relationship continuity, and past breaches of confidentiality.

Opportunities:

- Provide comprehensive medication education to staff and youth including purpose, side effects, and alternatives while ensuring informed consent, youth choice in treatment decisions, and safe medication changes under medical guidance.
- Expand mental health services beyond traditional talk therapy to include trauma-focused, somatic, art, and movement therapies, and develop peer-led support programs by former foster youth that address social anxiety, confidence building, and other individualized needs.
- Offer trauma-informed conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques to address behavioral challenges without resorting to punitive measures or law enforcement involvement, and ensure youth have access to these same skills through therapeutic programming and peer support.
- Clearly outline and consistently reinforce confidentiality protections with youth and young adults to build trust and preserve the integrity of therapeutic relationships.
- Change policy to protect young adults from lapsing Medicaid coverage for frequent moves or missed mail.

9

Reframe Harmful System Narratives

Youth carry the weight of their case files and the stigma of system involvement long after leaving care, reinforced by deficit-based language that labels challenges instead of strengths and frames aging out as failure.

Opportunities:

- Establish strong youth governance by creating and strengthening youth leadership councils with real decision-making power in program design, evaluation, and hiring, and require youth governance in all programs.
- Ensure youth have genuine authority and choice in shaping their own lives, plans, and services.
- Reframe system narratives by eliminating deficit-based language and judgment tied to case history. Recognize that while emancipation is a reality for many and sometimes the safest option, therefore it should be supported with the same commitment and resources as other permanency outcomes and transition paths, using strength-based, resilience-focused messaging that holds the system accountable.

Strengthen System Coordination and Sustainability

Texas's transition to Community-Based Care presents opportunities to address longstanding barriers and to reimagine how we support youth and young adults aging out of foster care.

Opportunities:

- Reduce administrative burden and confusion for providers contracting with multiple SSCCs and DFPS by creating universal guidelines, integrated data systems, and clear roles across regions.
- Build strategic community partnerships with schools, employers, universities, and local organizations to expand capacity and create sustainable supports for young adults in employment, education, housing, and mental health.
- Center youth voice and collective responsibility by engaging young people in shaping policies and programs, ensuring systems provide the supports and opportunities needed for them to succeed.
- Strengthen provider capacity and fully leverage federal funding, recognizing that well-supported transitions prevent higher expenses in homelessness, healthcare, criminal justice, and lost economic productivity long term.

10



WHAT DOES SUCCESSFUL ADULT LIVING MEAN TO YOUNG ADULTS?

“A successful adult doesn’t have to be someone who owns their own property, have a spouse and works a decent paying job. And a successful adult doesn’t have to be someone who had avoided being homeless, on the streets, begging for food and struggling to survive. A successful adult as I would define, would be someone who has worked hard to do what they want. They didn’t limit themselves to society’s standards.”- young adult

“Being ok with yourself, having no family is hard so you have to figure out how you can build yourself and the life you want so you can be happy. I strive to be the best I can be in all areas of my life, I hope I keep finding the strength to keep going.”- young adult

“Being a successful adult can mean many different things, and it all depends on our personal goals and viewpoints. For me, that means doing what you can for yourself and the people you care for. It means putting in the effort but making sure to rest when needed. Follow your own paths and make your own story. Be authentically you while celebrating your own wins, no matter how ‘small’ they seem.”- young adult

WHAT DOES SUCCESSFUL ADULT LIVING MEAN TO YOUNG ADULTS?

BASIC NEEDS

- Stable and safe housing
- Independent living skills
- Food, utilities, clothing, and essential necessities
- Reliable vehicle and driver's license or access to public transportation

LIFE SKILLS AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Self-discipline, confidence, self-awareness, independence, and accountability
- Communication skills and emotional intelligence
- Practical life skills, including household management, employment readiness, and knowing when to seek support

RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY

- Strong, healthy support networks with friends, family (biological or chosen), and community
- Mentorship and social connection
- Honest communication and healthy boundaries
- Building healthy partnerships and family life, including parenting if desired

FINANCIAL SECURITY

- Steady income and not living paycheck to paycheck
- Budgeting, saving, 401k, and responsible money management
- Paying bills on time and managing expenses responsibly



EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND CAREER

- High school diploma or postsecondary degree
- Stable and meaningful employment with career development opportunities
- Entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities
- Vacation, travel, and manageable stress levels

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Emotional stability, peace of mind, and access to mental health services
- Healthy wellness routines, good hygiene, and medication management
- Prioritizing spiritual wellbeing or faith

PURPOSE, GROWTH, AND DEFINING SUCCESS

- Understanding that success is not linear and defining success on your own terms
- Following your passions, setting goals, and staying committed to your path
- Building a growth mindset through persistence, learning from mistakes, and continual self-improvement



WHAT DO STAFF WANT FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE THEY SERVE?

“They have enough barriers as it is, eliminating or mitigating as many barriers as possible so they can experience a healthy productive life and to let them know people care.”- staff

“I would love a future that is truly empathetic towards individual pathways to success. Life is not a straight line. Life is full of twists and turns. Society loses sight of this truth. Our children deserve a future that believes in them.” - staff

“Their past can be a tool instead of a weapon used against them.” - staff

“I want them to be proud of themselves. They have survived way more than I ever could!!” - staff

employment safety financial
connection self-worth
love resources goals
home growth happiness
hope
education housing trust
career stability peace
healing community
dreams optimism skills
grace choice purpose
healthy independence empowerment
security confidence
mentors life
achievement opportunities success
family relationships coping
support

IN THE DETAILS: *BARRIERS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND WHAT WE HEARD*

Young adults have a clear vision of success, and staff are deeply committed to supporting them, but systemic barriers, policy limitations, and resource constraints get in the way. Many of the challenges young people face are interconnected and barriers in one area, such as housing, employment, or documentation, often influence others, and solutions in one domain can strengthen outcomes across the board. This section provides a detailed summary of findings from our conversations with young adults and staff across Texas, highlighting both barriers and opportunities to improve policy, programs, and practices.

Some opportunities aim to strengthen existing systems, while others suggest new strategies. Drawing on these insights, along with research, data, and existing literature on foster youth outcomes, the recommendations in this report are intended for consideration and further development by SSCCs, DFPS, providers, community partners, and policymakers at all levels. While approaches may differ across communities and regions, the goal is to encourage system-wide collaboration, center the voices of young people with lived experience, and promote innovative strategies that help youth successfully transition to independence. This section includes quotes and stories shared by young adults and staff, offering real-world perspectives along with supporting research and data.

1. EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

Extended Foster Care (EFC) is a voluntary program for youth who turned 18 in DFPS care, allowing them to remain in foster care until age 21 (or 22 for high school completion) if they sign an agreement, meet education or employment requirements, and have an available approved placement. Youth can transition between qualifying activities but must maintain continuous participation with no more than 30-day gaps. The program includes a \$350/month stipend.

Through a data purchasing agreement with the Department of Family and Protective Services, we looked at trends in enrollment rates for EFC, time in care, and placement types. Although rates vary by region, statewide data show that for the last two fiscal years, 48% of youth who aged out of care enrolled in EFC, up from 43% or 44% in the previous few years. For those that do enroll, time in EFC is usually one year or less, on average.

1.1 What Influences Young Adults to Stay in Extended Foster Care?

Reasons to Stay:

Basic needs and survival

- Youth fear homelessness and have nowhere else to go. Many stay because remaining in care makes more sense than the alternative.
- The \$350 monthly stipend covers food security and basic needs.
- Staying in care provides connection to resources they cannot access on their own, specifically additional support in getting life skills and help with documentation.

Support and guidance

- Young adults stay because they need a support system and want more guidance as they get their lives started and learn life skills. They see EFC as a new foundation because they don't know much about the real world yet.
- Support systems including caseworkers, CASA volunteers, PAL workers, therapists, attorneys, judges, friends, family, and school counselors heavily influence their decisions.
- Some foster parents are supportive and allow youth to stay with them after turning 18, and some shared they had great support by PAL and their caseworkers which ultimately improved their experience in foster care.

Personal motivation and goals

- Young adults choose to stay to break the cycle, pursue personal goals, and access all available help.
- One young adult stayed because her baby was adopted by her foster parents, allowing her to remain connected.

Benefits youth didn't realize they already have

- Many young adults cite access to Medicaid, food stamps, and tuition waivers as reasons they chose to stay in EFC. However, these benefits are available to all young adults who age out of foster care at 18 or older, regardless of whether they enroll in EFC.
- This reinforces the information gap for many young people as they age out of care and make decisions based on incomplete or incorrect information about what benefits they will retain or lose if they don't choose EFC.

Coming back after leaving

- Some young adults left at 18, struggled, and returned to EFC after experiencing homelessness, substance use, or recognizing they weren't prepared for independence. This pattern shows that many don't want to stay in foster care but find out-of-care options limited and challenging.
- Some young adults don't realize they can return to EFC, meaning others who might benefit never access this option.

Reasons to leave:

Want for independence

- Young adults leave because they want their own place and are trying to be independent. They want freedom and often feel like doing it alone is better than staying in care.
- Many don't want control over their lives anymore and want to get away from foster care because their experience was bad.
- Some young adults leave care to reconnect with bio parents, siblings, other family members, and friends.

Restrictive rules and lack of autonomy

- Youth and young adults leave care because of oppressive restrictions and lack of normalcy. In some aftercare programs, they still live under stringent rules, feel like minors in foster care, and have curfews that don't allow company.
- They describe foster care as "militant and oppressive," creating an institutionalized life with no privacy. As they explained: "Privacy is hard because there are cameras everywhere in foster care and this does not teach us healthy boundaries."

Staff issues and system mistreatment

- Young people don't always have good relationships with staff and want to leave care to escape what they described as "bad, corrupt, and negative staff who lack compassion and belittle them." Some young adults feel staff are not properly trained and treat the work as just a job. As one young adult said: "I did not sign up because of the way they treated me."
- Many experienced three or more caseworkers in short periods, and treatment before age 18 directly impacts their openness to extended care options.

Safety and abuse

- For some, the child welfare system became a source of harm rather than protection, making them want to leave care as soon as possible. They experienced abuse, violence, sexual assault, and grooming. Young adults shared that they are taken advantage of and don't feel safe. One young adult shared that he was physically beaten by a peer while placed in an out-of-state RTC, requiring hospitalization and reconstructive facial surgery.

"We are vulnerable, and we don't have anyone to advocate for us, so we get taken advantage of."



- Young people feel some foster homes and residential facilities lack adequate training and resources to support youth with complex trauma histories. Youth described RTC environments where staff functioned more as security personnel than trauma-informed caregivers. As one youth described their residential treatment experience: "It felt terrible to be in and the staff were very mean. They would inject us with meds when we had an anger episode when all I wanted was to be comforted and given a space to calm down."
- Young adults talked about fear and hesitancy in reporting abuse due to staff retaliation and potentially moving again to an even more unsafe placement.

Stigma and low expectations

- Some young people feel like caseworkers give up on them at 17 and assume they "are going to fail," and feel like they are perceived as bad, with their pasts constantly being held against them.
- They said that paper trails and long files are used to judge them and hinder their in-care housing options anyway, "decisions and mistakes as a minor shouldn't hinder my resources."

Program and system barriers

- Young adults consistently report not being told about EFC. "Nobody told me" was mentioned repeatedly in every region.
- Some left care not by choice, but because they lack proper documentation and can't meet EFC eligibility requirements.

"Everything is so dependent on the placement you are in" and "poor placements will lead young people to leaving care."



- They shared a lack of placement options in foster care and EFC that will accept them; some even felt actively pushed out. Others are placed out of state just weeks before turning 18.

- Young adults felt confused about what to do and shared they were “thrown out” at 18. Several said that transitional programs aren’t actually transitional, and the system makes false promises of independence, safety, and stability that never materialize.
- Many feel like staff do not know how to support those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism, or other specialized needs.

Criminalization and incarceration

- Young people experience the “criminalization of us.” Minor altercations in placements can lead to jail time and behavioral cases follow them into adulthood.
- Young adults placed in RTCs shared that staff called police on them and they went to jail right before aging out.

Opportunities:

Expand eligibility and align with developmental needs

- Raise the EFC age limit to 26 to align with brain development research and the realistic timeline for achieving stability. Young adults consistently recommend extending support beyond age 23, noting that arbitrary age cutoffs don’t correspond to when they actually achieve housing, employment, and educational goals. This means providing ongoing access to housing assistance, educational resources, healthcare, employment support, and emergency safety nets, not replicating foster care structures for older adults.
- Develop differentiated eligibility requirements that recognize not all youth are ready for independent living at 18, with pathways that match individual developmental readiness rather than chronological age.
- Create flexible eligibility structures for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism, and other specialized needs who require longer timelines and different pathways to independence than current program structures allow.
- Expand eligibility to include adopted youth who return to care when adoptions disrupt.

“If you don’t age out you don’t get any help, so for those that get adopted and it doesn’t go well, they get screwed over.”



Improve information access and system understanding

- Address the widespread information gap about EFC. Young adults across all regions reported

“nobody told me,” and many judges, CASAs, caseworkers, and other decision-makers lack accurate information about the program. Launch a comprehensive information campaign targeting all stakeholders to ensure everyone understands what EFC is, who qualifies, and how to access it.

- Provide EFC information to youth by age 16 through all touchpoints including PAL, caseworkers, group meetings, school outreach, and youth-to-youth mentoring so they can make informed decisions with adequate time to plan.
- Change the program name from “Extended Foster Care” and reposition the program as a bridge to independence. Young adults repeatedly stated the current name is “a turn off” that creates stigma and assumptions that their needs are met when they often aren’t. Beyond the name change, the program itself must deliver on being a support system that offers opportunities and choice rather than a control system that extends foster care restrictions beyond age 18.

Center youth choice and autonomy

- Explore implementing an opt-out rather than opt-in model for EFC enrollment, where all eligible youth are automatically enrolled unless they choose to leave. An opt-out model would shift the burden: young adults start with guaranteed support and can choose independence when they’re ready, rather than losing support by default and having to fight their way back in.
- Ensure young people receive unbiased information about their options and viable alternatives outside EFC, so staying is a genuine choice, not a default due to lack of options.

“I think that it should be our decision because we already feel like we don’t have a lot of control.”



2. SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Youth face significant systemic barriers as they transition to adulthood, including inadequate preparation for independent living, lack of essential documentation, and weak or non-existent support systems.

2.1 Youth Are Not Prepared For Independent Living

One of the most prevalent challenges identified by both young adults and staff is that young people aging out of foster care lack the fundamental life skills that are critical to safe, healthy, stable independent living.

The Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program is intended to prepare youth age 16 and older who will likely age out of foster care without achieving legal permanency for independent living when they turn 18. When funding is available, youth may start in the program as early as age 14. The program includes life skills training covering health and safety, housing, transportation, job readiness, financial management, and relationships. Additional supports such as vocational training, GED classes, driver education, counseling, and mentoring vary by access and funding. These trainings, supports, and other services are offered through contracted providers across the state.

In the first quarter of 2025, 92.1% of youth statewide who turned 18 had completed the required PAL life skills training. Although a high percentage of youth complete the training, the most common thing we heard was that this does not translate to readiness. The transition from institutional dependency to total independence is abrupt and developmentally inappropriate. SIL staff struggle to compensate for years of missed preparation. Youth arrive lacking basic self-care skills, interpersonal competencies, and experience navigating appointments, benefits, and applications, and other skills that should be developed, or introduced, throughout adolescence.

Federal funding for PAL has been cut substantially since fiscal year 2022. Looking ahead to fiscal year 2026, Texas will receive \$5,621,144 for Independent Living Awards, a 23% reduction in Chafee Funds. A majority of the cuts will go to contracted services, which could result in limitations to the supports that are offered through the PAL program moving forward.

Barriers:

Communication gaps prevent youth from getting critical information

- Youth receive contradictory information from different sources, learn about resources too late, or receive no information at all. Those with stable PAL worker relationships and fewer placement changes report better experiences with receiving information.
- Staff acknowledge information shared when a person is in fight or flight mode isn't retained, but that's often what happens. Staff also spend significant time researching benefits independently due to communication challenges within and across agencies.

Online training doesn't translate to real-world skills

- Youth receive online training at 16 but rarely revisit or apply it, resulting in low retention. The current approach doesn't include opportunities for practice or skill reinforcement.
- Placement restrictions prevent hands-on practice. Some settings don't allow youth to cook, clean,

or use appliances, and youth in more restrictive placements often don't receive PAL or life skills training at all.

- Real-world practices such as grocery shopping, managing money, or making appointments are done *for* young people rather than *with* them.

Staff lack capacity and resources to teach life skills

- PAL staff shared that heavy caseloads, bureaucratic processes, and judicial pressure often mean they end up "doing" instead of "teaching," turning skill development into a checklist.
- PAL staff are often viewed as administrative rather than skilled professionals, leading to role confusion with caseworkers and lack of support from leadership.

Staff Voice: "18 is too far gone to start these skills and education"
"Success is measured by curriculum completion, not actual skill development"



"Don't teach us anything when under 18, then expect us to know everything at 18"

Opportunities:

Update curriculum, delivery, and timing

- Begin transition planning at least two years before turning 18 with step-by-step skill building and evidence of hands-on practice, not just paperwork completion. For youth who enter care at 17, develop accelerated but comprehensive preparation plans that prioritize immediate needs (documentation, housing, benefits) while building toward long-term stability.
- Modernize PAL training with experiential learning: youth-designed curriculum, simulations, and practice opportunities that teach the “why” and “how” behind life skills, not just checklists to complete.

Increase placement accountability and support

- Equip foster homes and RTCs with specific tools, training, and financial support for youth skill-building, including kitchen access policies, allowance management systems, and age-appropriate decision-making frameworks.
- Integrate normalcy principles across all placement types and create alternative skill-building pathways when placements don’t feel safe for practice, such as community-based life skills programs or mentor support.

Reimagine and elevate the PAL worker role

- Redefine PAL workers as transition experts who serve as the critical bridge between child welfare and the real world.
- Reduce caseloads to enable relationship-building, increase compensation to reflect specialized expertise, and provide comprehensive tools, training, and resources to coordinate across all systems.
- Shift from checking boxes to ensuring youth-led pathways to stability. Staff and placements have the resources and training that they need to ensure every youth has a realistic, supported plan with relationships to sustain it.

Expand case management models and tools

- Implement evidence-based intensive case management models like LifeSet to support PAL workers, caseworkers, and SIL programs. These structured, individualized approaches meet young people where they are with flexible, trauma-informed support that extends beyond traditional system boundaries and ensures continuity of care during and after transitions, not just until a case closes.

2.2 Missing Vital Documentation

Documentation emerged as one of the most frequently discussed barriers across all convenings with young adults and staff. In Q1 FY2025, 27.6% of youth age 16 or older had identification.³

Barriers:

System and administrative processes create bottlenecks

- Obtaining out-of-state birth certificates is especially difficult, sometimes requiring court orders.
- Documents are lost during placement transfers, names are misspelled, and interstate bureaucracy complicates the process.
- Navigating the Texas Department of Public Safety to obtain a driver’s license is time-consuming and requires multiple appointments, creating additional barriers for young people and staff working against tight timelines.

³ Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, “Fiscal Year 2025 Quarter 2 Report Card,” (2025), <https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About-DFPS/Reports-and-Presentations/Quarterly-Performance/FY25-Q2-Report-Card.pdf>

High turnover and staffing challenges disrupt the process

- Staff face tight timelines working against heavy caseloads and high turnover rates. Caseworker turnover disrupts the process, as each transition sometimes means starting over.
- Some youth enter care just months before turning 18, leaving little time to complete the lengthy documentation process.

Placement instability creates gaps

- Frequent placement moves create gaps in educational and medical records needed for documentation.
- Young adults and staff describe last-minute scrambles before aging out as placement changes disrupt continuity.

Missing documents prevents access to basic services

- Young people often lack the knowledge and resources to advocate for themselves or navigate the complex steps required to obtain documents, particularly without dedicated caseworker support.
- Without proper documentation, young people cannot work, enroll in school, open bank accounts, rent apartments, join the military, or access most services, including meeting the eligibility requirements for EFC and independent living.

Opportunities:

Strengthen documentation systems and prioritization

- Ensure documentation process begins at least 6 months before turning 18 (or immediately upon entering care for youth 17+) with database tracking and deadline alerts.
- Advocate for federal legislation that creates a standardized, expedited process for foster youth to obtain vital records from any state, similar to existing passport expedite processes, and explore state legislation requiring all Texas agencies to prioritize foster youth documentation requests over non-urgent administrative requests.

Build capacity and expertise

- Provide training for caseworkers and PAL staff on documentation navigation, common challenges, and proven strategies from experienced staff.
- Create a centralized resource documenting existing expedited processes, fee waivers, and workarounds that staff can access and contribute to.
- Establish dedicated regional documentation liaisons to expedite processes and troubleshoot barriers.

Expand access and education on documentation

- Provide free copies of birth certificates, social security cards, state IDs, and driver's licenses to all former foster youth regardless of Extended Foster Care enrollment or placement status. Expand eligibility for the Form 2042 (Foster Care Residency Verification) to include those *not* in paid placements after age 18.
- Deliver comprehensive education to all youth in care starting at age 14 on how to obtain birth certificates, driver's licenses, and state IDs, including their rights to free documents, the step-by-step process, required forms (including Form 2042), safe document storage, address verification options, and how to advocate for themselves if documents are not provided. Ensure youth know to contact the Texas Foster Care Ombudsman if caseworkers do not provide necessary forms.

2.3 Lack Of Healthy Connections And Support Systems

Healthy relationships and connections are vital for youth development, fostering resilience, self-confidence, and skills for future success. Without consistent, trustworthy adults, young people cannot access support even when they desperately need it and without connections to family and peers, they are at higher risks of neurocognitive development difficulties and mental health disorders.⁴

Barriers:

Siblings are separated and family connections are difficult to maintain

- Siblings represent one of the few consistent relationships many foster youth have. Youth and young adults are commonly separated from siblings, and many placements don't facilitate visits or prioritize supporting these relationships.
- Maintaining or reconnecting with biological families is challenging. There can be confusion around separation, roles, and responsibilities, and many often navigate complex family dynamics without guidance. Young adults and staff shared that pressure and sometimes resentment from biological families causes stress, yet lack of any relationship with biological families can hinder development and success in future relationships. Young adults also felt judgment from staff about their biological families' struggles and mistakes, and their decisions about staying connected or wanting to visit or reunite.

Youth struggle to build healthy relationships and experience normalcy

- Many youth and young adults in foster care are surrounded by people paid to be in their lives. Many aspects of their life lack normalcy, and they don't often observe examples of healthy

relationships. Young people and staff shared challenges in forming healthy, secure intimate or sexual relationships.

- Young adults feel isolated without anyone to rely on due to lack of trust and community. There are limited opportunities to build community connections and experience normalcy like playing sports or other extracurricular activities, working, or visiting family and friends.

High turnover and system instability erodes trust

- Young adults lack trust with the child welfare system due to being lied to, let down repeatedly, and passed around from caseworker to caseworker and placement to placement. System stress and instability lead to young adults experiencing retaliation, causing them to become secretive or dishonest as self-preservation. This creates distrust within what is often their only available support system, leading to survivalist self-reliance even when support is available.
- High turnover rates with PAL, caseworkers, and other staff impact relationship-building and contribute to feelings of abandonment. Staff workload stress and burnout are sometimes viewed as lack of caring by young adults, leading to inconsistent communication that further hinders trust.

Staff: "If we have all of these challenges, imagine what the young adults are experiencing."



Opportunities:

Strengthen workforce support and sustainability

- Dramatically reduce caseloads to enable staff to build genuine relationships with young people.
- Invest in mental health support, self-care, and resilience training for staff experiencing burnout and secondary trauma.
- Use value-based hiring and retention: hire people who care and train them well, with competitive compensation and career growth opportunities recognizing this specialized, difficult work.

Prioritize sibling and family connections

- Ensure sibling contact is a priority and never use contact as punishment or reward.
- Facilitate sibling connections during EFC by eliminating restrictive rules that prevent sibling visits and providing spaces and support for young adults who want siblings to visit or live with them.
- Provide education and support on reconnecting with biological families in healthy ways and navigating complex family dynamics, valuing all forms of relational permanency.

⁴ Courtney, M. E., & Dworsky, A., "Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA," *Child & Family Social Work* 11, no. 3 (2006): 209-219, <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S019074090800159X>

3. CHALLENGES TO ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Even with maximum government benefits (SNAP and Medicaid), using the cheapest public transportation, very limited personal expenses, and the cheapest housing options, young people are still challenged to meet their basic needs every single month. Despite these universal needs, youth exiting foster care experience disproportionately high unemployment and significantly lower earnings than their non-foster care peers.^{5,6}

Texas minimum wage remains \$7.25 per hour, unchanged since 2009, while the cost of living has increased dramatically.⁷ According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, a single adult in Texas needs to earn between \$15-22 per hour depending on location to cover basic needs.⁸ For youth transitioning out of foster care, this gap between minimum wage and living wage creates significant barriers to stability.

The financial picture for youth aging out of foster care in Texas depends heavily on which supports they can access and maintain. While programs like Extended Foster Care, Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) housing vouchers, Transitional Living Allowance, Medicaid, and SNAP provide critical assistance with housing, healthcare, and food, these supports are often time-limited, have waiting lists, require regular recertification, and can be disrupted by administrative burdens or errors or policy changes.

Young adults shared their specific barriers to economic sustainability, shedding light on how these challenges play out in real life.

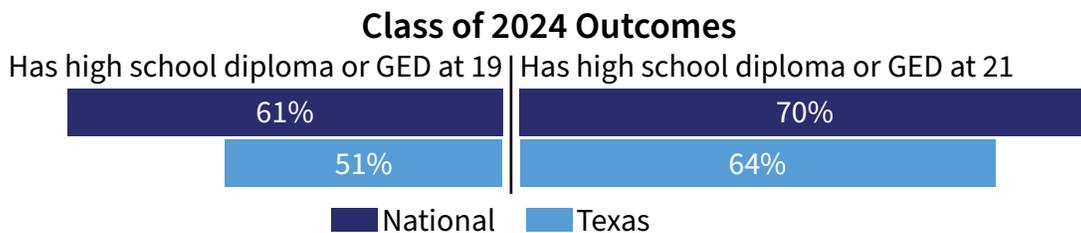
3.1 Broken Pathways To Academic Success

Education is one of the most significant barriers facing youth transitioning out of foster care.⁹ While education is often viewed as the pathway to stability and economic mobility, former foster youth face systemic barriers that prevent them from achieving educational success at rates comparable to their peers.

Barriers:

High school completion rates are significantly lower for foster youth

- In Texas, 91% of students in the class of 2024 graduated with a high school diploma or equivalency certificate.¹⁰ The National Youth In Transition (NYTD) data shows that only 51 percent of former foster youth who have aged out of care in Texas have a high school diploma or GED by 19 years old. Former foster youth in Texas are doing worse than the national average at both 19 and 21 years old.¹¹



5 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “What Happens to Youth Aging Out of Foster Care?,” <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-happens-to-youth-aging-out-of-foster-care>

6 Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, “Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth,” <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/midwest-evaluation-of-the-adult-functioning-of-former-foster-youth/>

7 Texas Workforce Commission, “Texas Minimum Wage Law,” <https://www.twc.texas.gov/jobseekers/texas-minimum-wage-law>

8 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Living Wage Calculator: Texas,” <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/48/locations>

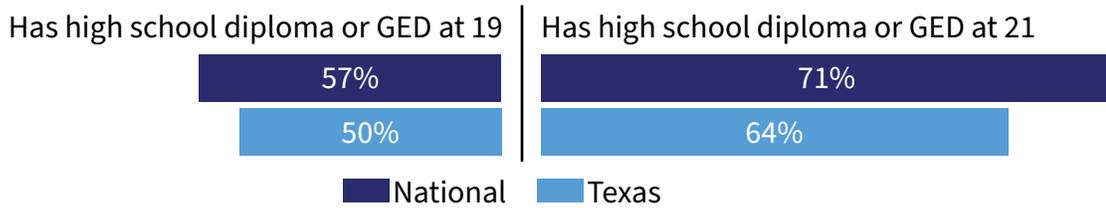
9 Bureau of Labor Statistics: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Unemployment Rates and Earnings by Educational Attainment,” <https://www.bls.gov/emp/chart-unemployment-earnings-education.htm>

10 Texas Education Agency, “Research and Analysis: Data Search,” <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/acctres/completion/2024/state.html>

11 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, “Outcomes Data Snapshot: Texas,” National Youth in Transition Database, <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/nytd-outcomes-tx-2024.pdf>

- Even among young adults participating in EFC, which requires school enrollment or employment, only 64% have graduated by age 21, still significantly lower than the general Texas student population graduation rate of 91%.¹²

Texas Extended Foster Care Comparison Class of 2024



Systemic instability disrupts academic progress

- Credits don't transfer between schools, constant placement moves disrupt learning, and restrictive placements add challenging layers to academic success.
- On average, youth who aged out of the system are in foster care for over four years and nine placements.¹³
- Many young adults shared that finishing high school in foster care can be overwhelming and once they turn 18, there's not enough help available to finish their diplomas.

The CalYOUTH study found that remaining in care beyond age 18 was associated with an 8% increase in high school completion, a 5-12 percent increase in college enrollment, and a 19 percent decrease in homelessness.¹⁴ This study showed that each additional year in extended care raises the likelihood of college enrollment by 9-11 percentage points, and young adults in extended foster care are 1.8 times more likely to complete a degree than those who exit at age 18. Texas NYTD data shows similar patterns, with EFC participants faring substantially better in high school graduation and GED completion than those not enrolled. While EFC eligibility requirements (school enrollment or employment) mean participants may already be on stronger trajectories, the data demonstrates that extended support during the transition to adulthood is associated with significantly better outcomes.

remaining in care beyond age 18 was associated with an

8% increase

in high school completion

5-12% increase

in college enrollment

19% decrease

in homelessness

Low utilization of Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) limits post-secondary access

2/3 of eligible students

enrolled in college were not awarded or did not use ETV vouchers

National data shows that nearly two-thirds of eligible students enrolled in college were not awarded or did not use ETV vouchers, and we know that ETV utilization has declined nationally in recent years.¹⁵ In the September 9, 2025, DFPS Council Meeting, DFPS shared data indicating that the federal Chafee allotment for Texas ETV will be reduced by over 25% for fiscal year 2026 due to fewer youth in care. Additionally, data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board showed that 4,160 former foster youth were served with higher education tuition and fee waivers in the 2023-2024 school year, down from 5,962 just two years prior. While fewer children and youth are entering care, ensuring robust ETV utilization remains a priority.

¹² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, "Outcomes Data Snapshot: Texas," National Youth in Transition Database, <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/nytd-outcomes-tx-2024.pdf>

¹³ Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, "Child Protective Services (CPS) Conservatorship: Children Exiting DFPS Legal Custody," https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Conservatorship/Exits.asp

¹⁴ Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, "Impacts of Extended Care on Youth Outcomes Two Years after Foster Care Has Ended," <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/impacts-of-extended-care-on-youth-outcomes-two-years-after-foster-care-has-ended/>

¹⁵ Urban Institute, "Do Education and Training Vouchers Make a Difference for Young Adults in Foster Care?," <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/do-education-and-training-vouchers-make-difference-young-adults-foster-care>

- Young adults consistently shared they didn't know about ETVs until after aging out, if they learned about them at all.
- Many misunderstood eligibility requirements, believing they had to both age out of foster care and be in EFC to qualify.

Administrative, financial, and practical barriers prevent college enrollment and graduation

- Challenges with placement requirements, obtaining proper documentation, and lacking support to navigate the system and application process prevent youth from enrolling.
- Many young adults are not in the mental or developmental state to transition directly to college after aging out.
- The \$5,000 maximum ETV amount is insufficient to meet current education needs. This amount has remained unchanged since 2008, covering significantly less in today's dollars than seventeen years ago.
- Many lack practical support such as help moving into college with basic necessities and transportation to move in and out of dorms. Although legislation requires academic institutions to help EFC students find housing during breaks, some are unaware of this requirement or struggle to access this support.

Opportunities:

Improve information access and awareness

- Ensure ETV information is provided by age 16 (or immediately if entering care after 16) through multiple channels: PAL training, school outreach campaigns embedded in Texas high schools, and direct youth-to-youth information sharing.
- Expand information dissemination through social media and platforms where youth actually get information, not just through formal system channels.
- Provide intensive FAFSA completion support for all youth, including dedicated staff to walk youth through applications, gather required documentation, and troubleshoot barriers. Reduce application burdens by using administrative data matches wherever possible to pre-populate information.

Provide preparation and post-secondary support

- Create post-18 diploma completion pathways with DFPS/SSCC payment responsibility for GED programs (coursework, training, testing) for any youth who aged out until age 21 or High School Equivalency Subsidy Program eligibility.
- Develop comprehensive college and trade school readiness programs starting at age 16 with structured activities and skill-building for youth not currently engaged in extracurricular programs.
- Strengthen relationships with school districts to share information and work together to identify and address the educational needs of students in foster care.
- Support educational continuity regardless of frequent placement changes by limiting moves and ensuring academic records and credits are transferred quickly when moves do occur.

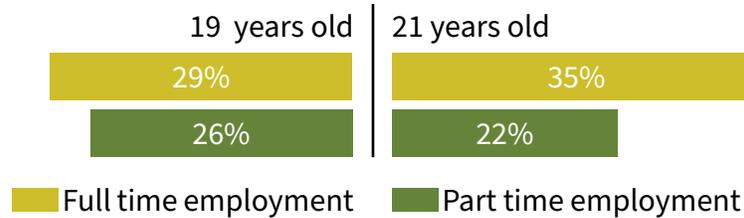
Expand policy

- Expand ETV partnerships with trade schools using less restrictive eligibility requirements. Allow ETV for non-accredited organizations, programs under one year, and innovative programs responsive to current job market needs without requiring traditional accreditation or two-year existence requirements.
- Support educational continuity regardless of placement changes. Protect students from grade penalties, credit loss, and graduation delays caused by placement instability and frequent school moves.

3.2 Systemic Barriers To Employment

Employment represents a critical pathway to independence for youth transitioning out of foster care, yet systemic barriers prevent most from achieving economic stability. By age 21, less than half of young adults aging out of care have employment.

Texas Outcomes for Fiscal Years 2020 to 2024



Barriers:

Young adults need transportation to work

- Young adults don't have vehicles and cannot afford them on minimum wage salaries, even when working full time.
- Many lack licenses or proper documentation to obtain their license. Driver education is expensive, and many have no one to complete required practice hours with.
- Without an adult to add to their insurance plan, premiums are astronomical; insurance can cost up to \$800 per month for this population which is unaffordable on entry-level wages.
- Limited public transit and rural settings force young adults to find work within a small radius of their placement or along bus routes, severely limiting opportunities. Those in rural areas face even greater challenges with no transit options and longer commutes.
- Staff and young adults shared that those who use public transportation often struggle to navigate the system and don't always feel safe using it.
- Many rely on Uber as the "easiest option," which is financially unsustainable.

Youth enter adulthood with zero work experience

- Many youth enter adulthood without any work experience. Staff shared that young people age out with unrealistic expectations about employment and no understanding of workplace norms.
- Many placements don't support youth employment often due to concerns about transportation and schedule flexibility for foster

homes and stricter restrictions for residential treatment facilities.

- Placement instability greatly impacts employment opportunities, similar to education.
- Many young people lack soft skills for workplace environments and have unrealistic expectations about first jobs, including pay, schedules, and responsibilities. Young people get fired for not understanding basic workplace expectations and struggle managing job expectations and supervisor relationships.

Lack of training and exposure

- Without career exploration, vocational training, or exposure to skilled trades and career pathways, young people default to whatever entry-level position will hire them and without adequate supports, have a difficult time advancing.
- Many young adults shared they didn't have the capacity to think ahead or plan due to stresses in their placements, working through trauma, instability, and other challenges, so they didn't know where to start at 18.
- Young people miss opportunities for apprenticeships, technical training programs, and career-track positions that could lead to self-sufficiency.

Current workforce programs fall short

- Workforce programs vary by region and funding, creating gaps in service delivery. Many young adults don't know these services exist or how to access them, and programs may not address the fundamental barriers they face.

Opportunities:

Create more employment programs and partnerships

- Create rapid work experience opportunities for youth while still in care: paid internships, summer youth employment programs, apprenticeships, and skilled trades pathways that pay living wages.
- Expand partnerships with employers (particularly those on transit routes), unions, trade schools, and high-demand industries to provide first-job opportunities with built-in mentoring and on-the-job training.
- Develop supported employment programs that don't end when youth get hired. Provide job coaching and retention support for the first 6-12 months with targeted interventions when they struggle, helping them succeed rather than cycling through jobs.
- Establish hiring incentives for employers including wage subsidies and tax credits. Use Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) priority designation for foster youth in apprenticeships, include employer partnerships in SSCC contracts, and leverage Texas's size to pilot at scale.

Implement career readiness programs

- Address barriers and restrictions preventing youth from working before 18 and facilitate placement support for youth who want to work.
- Provide actual work experience, not just classroom training, including career exploration across industries, workplace expectations and soft skills training, job shadowing, mentorship programs, and employment-focused financial literacy covering paychecks, taxes, and benefits.

Develop transportation solutions and infrastructure

- Launch multi-pronged transportation pilots including rideshare partnerships, gas cards, public transit passes, regional voucher systems, and rural-specific solutions coordinated with TWC.
- Restore driver's education funding and partner with community agencies and volunteers to provide practice hours for licensure.
- Establish vehicle purchase assistance through dealership partnerships and create a state-insurance industry program for foster youth to address the extremely high premium crisis by eliminating adult co-signer requirements.
- Require all placements to support youth employment as a licensure condition and develop a foster youth employment guarantee program with integrated transportation, training, and support.

4. SAFE AND STABLE HOUSING

“The child welfare system is sometimes described as a highway to homelessness. An estimated 20 percent of young adults who are in care become homeless the moment they’re emancipated at the age of 18. And nationwide, 50% of the homeless population spent time in foster care.”

–National Foster Youth Institute



Finding housing after turning 18 is one of the most critical challenges for young adults aging out of foster care. Understanding their options requires navigating a complex system of programs, eligibility requirements, and funding streams. A housing plan guides youth through independent living readiness, eligibility screening, and required documentation to determine the best fit.¹⁷

4.1 Out of Care Housing

Out-of-Care Options:

Young adults who leave care or are not eligible for EFC, or do not elect to stay in care, can access federal housing programs, each with specific eligibility requirements and limited availability. Limited financial assistance is available to young adults after age 18. This includes the Transitional Living Allowance (up to \$1,000 one-time payment for young adults who completed life skills training and are working, in school, or seeking employment) and Aftercare Room and Board Assistance (up to \$500 per month, maximum \$3,000 total, for rent, deposits, utilities, and groceries for young adults ages 18-21 who aged out at 18 or older).

- **Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Vouchers:** This is a federal HUD program that allows Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) across the country to request Housing Choice Vouchers specifically for young people under age 25 with child welfare involvement. The vouchers provide up to 36 months of rental assistance (with possible 24-month extension under Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities (FSHO) amendments) for those age 18-24 who left or are leaving foster care and are homeless or at risk of homelessness. DFPS serves as the Public Child Welfare Agency (PCWA) that partners with local Public Housing Authorities across Texas to implement the federal HUD FYI program. DFPS has secured over 40 FYI partnerships across the state with around 400 effective vouchers and continues expanding partnerships with PHAs in different regions.
- **Transitional Living Programs (TLP):** These are independent transitional living programs for young adults who have left foster care or are not eligible for EFC. DFPS maintains a list of these programs throughout Texas, but young people can access them independently without being in DFPS custody.
- **Family Unification Program (FUP) Vouchers:** Serve those aging out of foster care who are at least 18 and not more than 24 years old, providing rental assistance to prevent homelessness.
- **Section 811 Project Rental Assistance (PRA):** Available in select metropolitan areas for aged-out foster youth with disabilities who receive SSI.
- **Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8):** Available to the general public but often have years-long waiting lists. Some public housing authorities offer priority or special programs for former foster youth.

Barriers:

Information gaps prevent young people from accessing housing resources

- Young adults consistently report not being told about housing options, with “nobody told me” repeated across every region. They are unaware of FYI vouchers, Section 8, and other housing programs until after they age out, when it’s often too late.

“We can’t ask for resources we don’t know exist”



¹⁶ National Foster Youth Institute, “Homelessness,” <https://www.nfyi.org/issues/homelessness/>

¹⁷ Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, “Youth Housing Program - Transition Aged Youth (TAY),” https://www.dfps.texas.gov/Child_Protection/Youth_and_Young_Adults/Transitional_Living/Housing/youth.asp

- There is often confusion about program eligibility or misunderstanding qualification requirements for various housing assistance programs.

Young adults lack preparation for independent housing management

- Youth are not taught essential housing skills before turning 18, including cooking, cleaning, managing a household, paying bills, or handling responsibilities. Many were not allowed to cook or clean while in foster care, leaving them completely unprepared.
- Young people struggle with managing money, budgeting, and saving, and lack knowledge about credit which all impact housing stability. This affects their ability to maintain housing, qualify for rental applications, and find jobs that pay enough to cover rent.
- Real-world housing tasks like completing long applications, understanding lease agreements, and navigating the rental process are overwhelming for those who have never practiced these skills.

Geographic displacement creates housing instability

- Youth age out in regions they're not from and are left with no way back to their hometown where they have connections and support systems. Regional variation in housing resource availability means some areas have no aftercare programs, available FYI vouchers, or much other housing assistance.
- Those in rural areas face compounded barriers with no transportation, no local jobs, and inability to access housing benefits or services available in urban areas.

System navigation is overwhelming and confusing

- The process of applying for housing assistance is confusing, with long applications and slow processing times creating delays when young adults need immediate housing solutions.
- Multiple systems that don't communicate with each other require young people to navigate bureaucratic processes alone without guidance or advocacy.
- Youth struggle to obtain vital documents like IDs, Social Security cards, and birth certificates that are essential for securing housing and employment. Many experience last-minute runarounds and delays from caseworkers when trying to get these documents before aging out.

Fear of homelessness drives decision-making

- Finding affordable housing is extremely difficult given today's economy, with many unable to find jobs that pay enough to be self-sufficient and cover rent without significant support.
- Housing insecurity creates a crisis-driven approach rather than planned transitions, with youth making desperate choices to avoid homelessness rather than building toward stable independence.
- After aging out, young adults fall through the cracks with no clear pathway to housing assistance. Young adults described being "thrown out" at 18 with no transition plan, facing immediate homelessness or housing insecurity without support systems in place.

Opportunities:

Ensure early access to comprehensive housing information

- Information should be delivered through caseworkers, PAL training, group meetings, school outreach, and youth-to-youth mentoring to ensure all youth receive consistent, accurate information regardless of placement.
- Youth need clear, step-by-step explanations of how to apply for each housing program, qualification requirements, timelines, and what to expect during the application process to reduce confusion and increase successful access.

Ensure adequate financial support for housing stability

- Young adults need more financial support to cover housing costs, with recommendations including

emergency funds for housing crises, help with security deposits and move-in costs, and support that bridges the gap between aging out and employment stability.

- Support should include help accessing rental assistance programs and understanding how to leverage available resources like FYI vouchers, Section 8, and other housing assistance before it's too late.
- Increase funding for support services that accompany FYI vouchers, including intensive case management, life skills coaching, and crisis intervention to help young adults maintain housing stability and address barriers to self-sufficiency.

Address geographic barriers and support hometown connections

- Support young adults who aged out in regions they're not from with resources and coordination to return to their hometowns where they have family connections and support systems that can help with housing stability, including funding for relocation costs, housing deposits, and connections to local services and providers.
- Housing resources and aftercare programs should be expanded to underserved counties and rural areas where options are currently limited or nonexistent.
- Increase FYI vouchers to ensure more young adults aging out of foster care can access stable, affordable housing in both urban and rural areas.

Simplify system navigation and provide ongoing caseworker support

- Caseworkers need training on all available housing options so they can explain eligibility, walk youth through application processes, and connect them to appropriate resources based on individual circumstances.
- The application process for housing assistance should be simplified, with support available to help young people navigate long applications, understand qualification requirements, and follow up on slow processing times.
- More support should continue after placement ends, with caseworkers or transition specialists checking in to ensure youth maintain stability and can access additional resources if needed.

4.2 Extended Care Housing

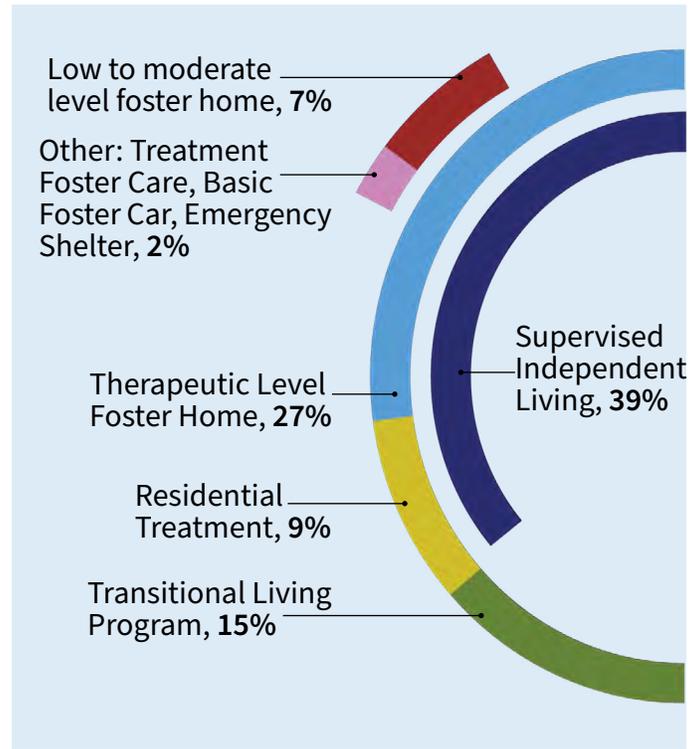
In-care housing options:

- **Supervised Independent Living (SIL):** The SIL program is a component of the EFC program and allows young adults to live independently. A young adult in SIL, is not supervised 24 hours a day and is allowed increased responsibilities, such as managing their own finances, buying groceries or personal items, and communicating with a landlord. Living arrangements may include apartments, non-college dorms, college dorms, or shared housing. For young adults with complex needs who require additional support to successfully adjust to independent living, SIL with Enhanced Case Management services has been available since 2020.
- **Transitional Living Programs (TLP):** Contracted residential programs for youth ages 15-22 that provide structured housing with support services, case management, and life skills training while youth remain under DFPS conservatorship. These placements serve those whose service plan goal is to attain fundamental life skills for successful transition to adulthood and require DFPS caseworker or child placing unit referral.
- **Foster Homes or Approved Home Settings:** Some young adults remain in foster homes or other approved placements while in EFC.

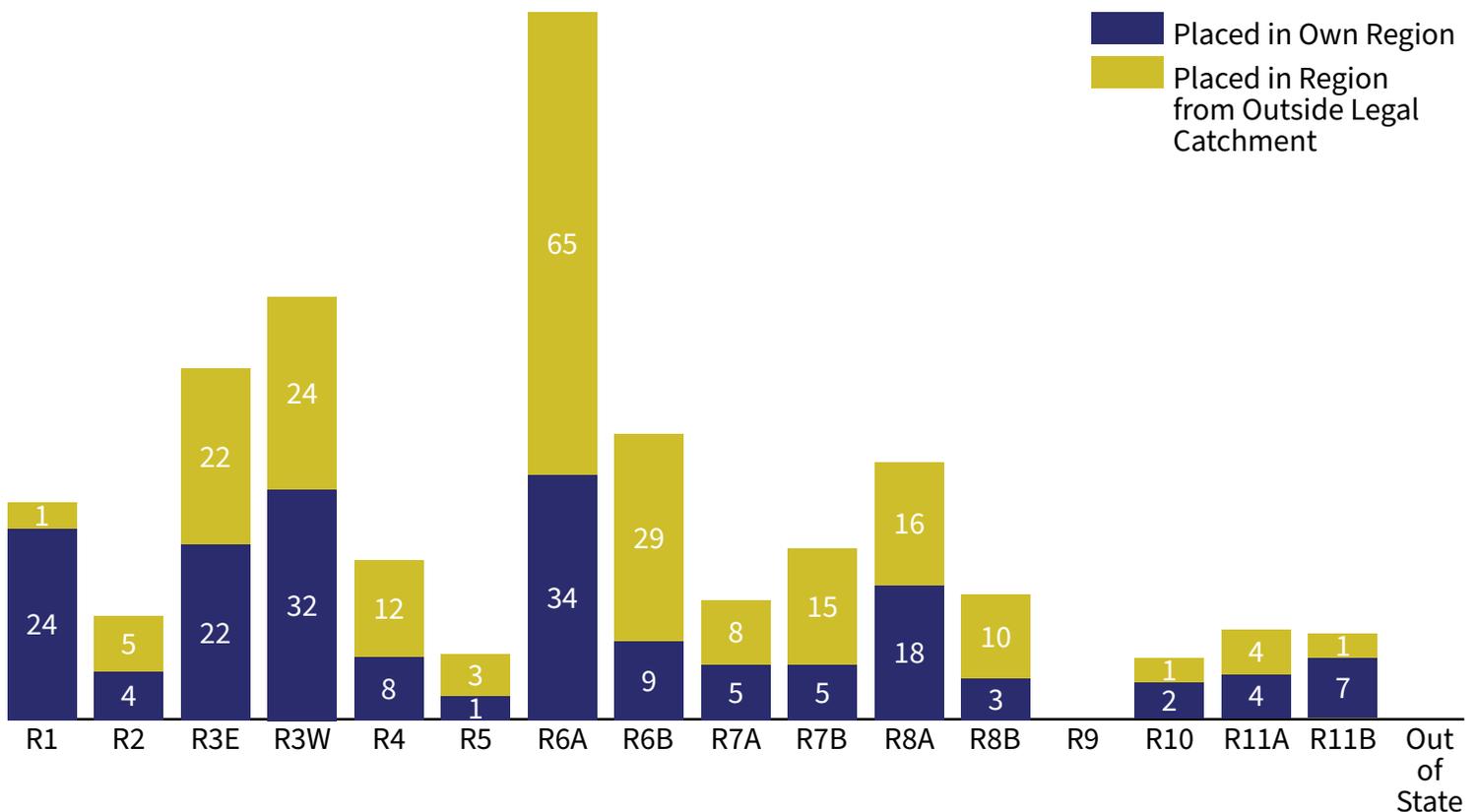
Of the 396 youth who aged out of care and entered EFC in fiscal year 2024, 35% required higher levels of care through therapeutic foster homes or Residential Treatment Centers, and 15 percent were placed in Transitional Living Programs. This placement distribution demonstrates that the majority of youth aging out are not ready for independent living at 18, continue to have high levels of need, and require more intensive supports as they transition to adulthood.

For this same population, Regions 6A and 3W are critical hubs for EFC, hosting far more young adults compared to other regions. Overall, EFC placements are more concentrated in urban areas (Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth), while rural regions see fewer placements.

Once a young person is in EFC, there are often placement moves and housing instability. Of the young adults who entered EFC in fiscal year 2024 and had placement moves in the program, 34% were initiated by CPS, 30% were requested by the caregiver or agency, and 13% were because the young adult refused to stay in the placement.



EFC Placements in Each Region, end of FY 2024





Supervised Independent Living

This section explores SIL programs in greater depth than previous sections because if done well, SIL represents an ideal model for supporting young adults transitioning to independence, one we would want available for all youth aging out of care. Because SIL serves as the placement for 39 percent of those entering EFC and represents a core component of extended foster care, we facilitated targeted discussions with both providers and youth to capture experiences from both perspectives, understand what works, identify challenges, and surface opportunities for strengthening these programs.

Seventy-eight SIL providers currently operate in the state and contract with DFPS and SSCCs. We held two virtual meetings with providers representing diverse program types across the state: college-based, community-based, gender-specific (boys, girls, LGBTQ), programs for mothers, apartment-style, and dorm-style settings. SIL programs operate very differently statewide.

What SIL Providers Are Proud Of

“I’m pretty new to the role but I’m most proud of the community that has been built among the students, they don’t feel alone and take inspiration from senior peers.”

“Watching them adjust to normalcy and go to school and work, bring out the grill and interact as a group, or blend in with the community, as big successes I take pride in.”

“I am most proud of the rapport I am able to build with young adults, how they feel about being in the program and have continued engagement and encourage others in the program coming up behind them.”

“Really try to be individualized and success looks different for every young adult, so we try to meet them where they are.”

Barriers:

Young adults fear replicating unsafe foster care experiences in SIL programs

- Young adults feel forced to share space with strangers whose backgrounds are unknown and unsafe. They described conflict with roommates and dealing with roommates’ mental health and stability issues.
- Young people shared experiences of abuse and sexual assault within SIL programs by roommates. They experienced a lack of safety and protection by staff and are afraid of reporting due to staff retaliation, not being believed, and the risk that reporting could put their housing in jeopardy.

Screening processes create housing gaps for vulnerable youth

Providers described screening processes unique to their programs, including virtual interviews (one program has a therapist on the initial call), and in-person visitation before approving placement. Young people arriving at programs are often not ready for independent living and don’t know what they’re getting into; most think it’s just another foster care placement.

- Providers stressed the need for transparency before approving placements.

“Just be honest with us because my program is not for everyone, we really need transparency from caseworkers and teams to make sure this is a good fit.”



- Providers were direct about who they often exclude and why, creating challenges in finding housing for many young people:
 - Young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities:

“Very intentional - so I will not bring in any diagnosed IDD. If they were taking classes in high school around IDD, have had a hard time with these individuals in the past, they can’t keep a job, have a hard time in the house, they are not successful and then I feel like I am contributing to homelessness. Most of these individuals do not do well in independent living situations, even when they come with enhanced case management.”



- Young adults with recent psychiatric hospitalization (within 3-6 months): Providers shared this is too risky and they lack mental health supports. Many youth go to hospitals or residential facilities when no other placements are available.
- Those with sexual offense history: Providers shared it’s harder to meet their needs, and HOAs create additional barriers. Placing them with roommates or in spaces with volunteers or children was a concern.
- Any young adult previously dismissed from SIL:

“I will not take anyone who has been kicked out of a SIL previously.”



- Minor altercations in placements often result in police involvement and jail time rather than trauma-informed responses. Behavioral cases follow youth into adulthood, creating long-term consequences, with many SIL

programs excluding those with recent physical altercations or any criminal history.

- Trafficking survivors: Providers described the challenges of supporting trafficking survivors while ensuring safety for all residents.

“I have consistently had struggles with young ladies who have been trafficked, particularly when this develops into the young lady believing that this is the only way to earn income... for a very long time I stopped taking these intakes but have recently made a decision to look at this differently. I am trying to support this population but do so with caution, trial period. This is a constant struggle. There has to be a way for the state or community to assist in this process. I don’t want to bring in any situations where anyone else is being recruited.”



Young adults with specialized needs lack appropriate supports

- Young adults with IDD lack access to specialized housing options with appropriate supports and connections to disability service systems. Some SIL providers intentionally exclude youth with IDD, citing concerns that they cannot be successful in independent living situations even with enhanced case management.
- Young parents face limited specialized housing options that accommodate both parent and child. Childcare needs, parenting responsibilities, and education or employment requirements create competing demands without adequate coordinated support.
- Not all young adults feel safe in their placements based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and many avoid seeking services or leave placements to escape discrimination, placing them at significantly elevated risk for victimization, mental health crises, and continued housing instability.
- Undocumented youth and young adults face unique barriers navigating systems and accessing services without clear information about what services are available regardless of citizenship status. Staff and young adults lack access to

specialized legal support and advocacy to navigate immigration systems alongside child welfare systems.

- Young adults lack immediate access to safe, specialized placements designed for trafficking trauma and recovery. Staff lack training on trafficking-specific trauma, and the vulnerability factors that contribute to trafficking are not adequately addressed through prevention programs.

Safety, accountability, and consequences are unclear and inconsistent

- Providers face challenging situations holding youth accountable for housing violations while ensuring everyone's safety. DFPS does not allow stipend reductions without advance approval. The monthly stipend ensures young adults can purchase food, hygiene supplies, and clothing. Some SIL providers implement fines or additional chores when damage to the home environment has taken place.

“What is a reasonable consequence for some of these behaviors? For example, if they spend all their stipend and don't manage funds appropriately, what about property damage? It's hard to take their money to pay for damage because they are already limited, but outside of discharge, what is a reasonable response to some of these behaviors?”



- Young people want guests, but this creates challenges and tension.
- Providers shared this is truly independent living, so staff aren't on the property to oversee what's happening.

“The state guideline is that they can have guests, and our program has received pushback for having 60-day compliance rules and requiring IDs for guests.”



“How do I sleep at night without knowing if I am protecting them?”

System and structural barriers limit provider capacity

- The transition to Community-Based Care has created confusion for many providers who now contract with one, or more, SSCCs. This is an ongoing learning curve; providers are used to working with the state, so now they must adapt to new processes and educate SSCCs on what their programs are and aren't.

“I would like SSCCs to talk to each other and come up with 'like systems' because it is very confusing. They all do things differently, including different processes and documentation. If you are a one-staff SIL with 6 people in your program, there is no way you can manage this burden.”



- SIL programs often run very lean. Some SIL providers don't operate at capacity due to staff limitations, meaning beds sit empty while young people need housing.
- Many providers lack formal case management models, so meeting the needs of young people requiring supports is challenging. This often includes things that should have been addressed in foster care before 18, such as life skills and obtaining driver's licenses or other documentation.

Opportunities:

Address screening processes and housing gaps for the most vulnerable

- Ensure SIL operates as a comprehensive case management program, not just housing. Young people need varying levels of support: some need minimal check-ins, others need intensive case management. Programs should be equipped to serve across this spectrum.
- Strengthen planning for transitions after EFC. Young adults need to know what happens when SIL ends and have concrete plans rather than aging out of one system into another crisis.
- Increase education and vetting of SIL programs to ensure quality and safety standards are met across all providers.
- Map service availability by region, expand resources to underserved counties, and ensure at least one non-college SIL program option in each region so young adults aren't forced to relocate for housing.
- Develop regional partnerships for resource sharing and implement mobile service delivery models that “come to the client” rather than requiring young adults to travel long distances for services.

Create systems and supports for those with specialized needs

Young people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

- Create different eligibility structures for youth with IDD, including specialized assessment of housing and support needs and direct connection to disability service systems.
- Develop specialized housing options with appropriate supports rather than excluding those with IDD from independent living programs. As one provider stated about excluding youth with IDD: “I feel like I am contributing to homelessness if I accept them because they are not successful in my program.”
- Establish partnerships with disability service systems and create long-term supported living options with guardianship and decision-making support, building a comprehensive system serving young people across the functional ability spectrum.

Young Parents

- Implement a two-generation approach serving both parent and child with childcare assistance, parenting education and skills support, and coordination for employment and education.
- Provide specialized housing for young parents with embedded supports and extend parenting support past age 21 to break intergenerational cycles.

LGBTQ+ and Transgender Youth

- Provide safe, stable housing options where youth are protected from harassment, discrimination, and placement disruption, recognizing that LGBTQ+ youth experience disproportionately high rates of housing instability and homelessness after leaving care.
- Train housing providers and support staff to work effectively with all youth, creating environments where every young person can focus on education, employment, and stability rather than safety concerns.

Undocumented Youth and Young Adults

- Create state-level protections ensuring that any youth in state custody at 18 remains eligible for ALL state foster care benefits (EFC, housing vouchers, tuition waivers, Medicaid) through age 26, regardless of federal immigration status.
- Provide legal support and advocacy through partnerships with immigration legal services, long-term legal support and pathway planning.

Justice Involved

- Prevent juvenile justice involvement by ensuring youth in RTCs and foster homes have access to conflict resolution supports, trauma-informed de-escalation services, and community-based alternatives to arrest.

- Provide housing and legal support for those with criminal records and stop unnecessary police involvement in SIL programs, connecting youth to appropriate services rather than criminalization.
- Implement diversion programs that recognize trauma responses versus criminal behavior, address systemic factors creating the foster care to juvenile justice pipeline, and ensure child welfare responses to trauma (not criminal justice responses).

Trafficking Survivors

- Provide immediate access to safe placement, specialized trauma support and therapeutic housing, safety planning and protection, and specialized staff training on trafficking trauma. As one provider stated: “There has to be a way for the state or community to assist in this process” of supporting trafficking survivors in SIL programs.
- Develop long-term healing and recovery programs, provide state and community assistance for specialized trafficking survivor programs, implement prevention programs addressing vulnerability factors, and ensure comprehensive services addressing complex trauma.

Build a comprehensive housing continuum that meets young adults where they are

- Develop transitional living programs for 18 and older that bridge the gap between foster care and SIL programs, allowing young adults to remain under the same program and case management team while progressing from more supervised settings to fully independent living arrangements. This continuum ensures youth don’t age out into homelessness but instead graduate through supportive housing levels at their own pace, maintaining trusted relationships and consistent wraparound services throughout their journey to independence.

Establish safety and accountability framework

- Establish an independent ombudsman with investigative authority (independent from DFPS) for in care housing programs serving those over 18. This should be led by a person with lived experience.
- Create lived experience led safety councils in every region with direct authority to escalate concerns to oversight bodies and recommend program improvements. Youth and young adult voices must have power in identifying and addressing safety issues, not just be advisory.

5. MENTAL HEALTH AND STIGMA

Two interconnected challenges emerged as critical barriers to success: the mental health crisis facing youth in care and the harmful narratives and stigma that shape how young people see themselves and are seen by others.

5.1 Mental Health Support: A Critical Missing Piece

The American Academy of Pediatrics identifies mental and behavioral health as “the greatest unmet health need for children and teens in foster care.” More than half of adolescents in the child welfare system have been diagnosed with at least one mental health disorder, compared with just one-fifth of adolescents in the general population.

Barriers:

Mental health support is insufficient

- Youth enter care with mental health needs stemming from trauma, abuse, neglect, and loss. The foster care experience often compounds these needs through placement instability, caseworker turnover, separation from siblings, and additional trauma.
- Many of the young adults we talked to shared that they have a lot of mental health needs but they don't feel like they have the resources to address them. Mental health services become harder to access at 18, precisely when they lose other supports.

The system provides standardized responses to complex, individualized trauma

- Mental health struggles are “tiring” and “life draining.” They need peace of mind to succeed, but the system provides chaos and barriers. They are expected to heal from trauma while being constantly retraumatized in foster care.
- Mental health is not one-size-fits-all. Each person has unique needs, unique trauma histories, unique triggers, and unique healing processes. Yet the system offers standardized responses: talk therapy, medication, hospitalization. When those don't work, youth are blamed for “refusing services” rather than the system being held accountable for not meeting their actual needs.
- Engaging young people in therapy is difficult, even when available. Funding cuts make connecting to therapists challenging from the start, particularly as Medicaid providers drop out, leaving staff uncertain where to find services.

Many lack trust and control in their mental health care

- Young people want to be heard, not just talked at. They also shared wanting to be able to open up in their own time, not be forced.
- They often lack trust in therapists due to poor continuity of care, placement disruptions, and breaches of confidentiality.
- Many feel over-medicated, believing it is driven by financial motives of placements and caregivers. They shared that they weren't allowed to “feel” or have “emotions” without someone suggesting medication.
- They often didn't understand their prescriptions or like the side effects, and many stopped taking medications abruptly at 18.



“Medication makes you feel like zombie”

“I don't want to just be fed drugs for stress and trauma”



- While many youth don't understand why they're prescribed medication, staff view it as necessary for safety due to severe behaviors or mental health issues. Staff worry about what happens when youth abruptly stop taking medications after turning 18.

Opportunities:

Provide medication education and empowerment

- Provide robust medication education to staff and youth including what youth are taking, why it's prescribed, side effects, alternatives, and their right to refuse or request changes. Youth stated:

"I don't want to just be fed drugs, I was just stressed out and experiencing trauma but I didn't want drugs."



- Ensure informed consent is truly informed and youth must have genuine choice in treatment decisions; not just sign paperwork they don't understand.
- Coach young people and staff through changing or discontinuing medication safely and provide medical support for safe transitions and alternative coping strategies.

Expand therapeutic approaches and service delivery

- Provide mental health support tailored to individual needs offering alternative therapeutic approaches beyond talk therapy including trauma-focused, somatic, art, and movement therapies.
- Enable choice in mental health services where youth and young adults have genuine voice about providers, modalities, and medications. Youth should be able to change therapists if the fit isn't right without bureaucratic barriers.
- Build continuity of care through transitions to adulthood. Mental health support shouldn't end abruptly at 18 or 21; young adults need ongoing access to providers who know their history as they navigate independence.
- Create peer support programs led by former foster youth, mental health support groups, and creative approaches to increase utilization, with specific focus on social anxiety, confidence building, mental preparation for independence, and challenges like bullying.

Build trust

- Create transparent confidentiality protocols that balance safety with therapeutic trust. While therapists have mandated reporting obligations for abuse, safety concerns, and harm, young people need clear understanding of these boundaries

upfront, not after they've shared. When they know what will and won't be shared with caseworkers and foster parents, they can make informed decisions about what to disclose and build trust within appropriate limits.

"I would express what I was going through in therapy and would get whooped when I would get home. All we know is betrayal."



- Prioritize listening to youth and respecting when they are ready vs. pressuring them to disclose information.

5.2 Stigma, Case Files, And Changing The Narrative

Youth in foster care carry both visible documentation and invisible stigma that follow them long after they leave the system. These burdens, shaped by what's written about them and how they're perceived, affect their identity, access to support, and ability to move forward.

Case files become permanent records that limit opportunities

- Youth carry case files that document trauma responses, survival behaviors, and mistakes made during their most vulnerable years, often mixed with inaccurate documentation from caseworkers who barely knew them. These files follow them throughout their lives, affecting housing applications, program eligibility, and how they're perceived by new providers.

Stigma is internalized and prevents help-seeking

- The stigma is not just external; young people internalize it. What's written in case files and what staff say about them shapes their self-identity, reinforcing negative narratives or creating fear and distrust of the system meant to support them.
- Beyond case files, the foster care identity itself becomes something young people avoid disclosing. This prevents them from accessing certain benefits or programs because of the association with foster care. Some young adults specifically avoid connecting with other former foster youth or campus SIL programs to escape the automatic label.

The system must build accountability and honest support

- Staff emphasized that the system owes youth honesty and accountability; lies or sugar-coating don't help long-term, but accountability requires understanding what they have been through and why they behave the way they do.
- Real preparation for independence means meeting young people where they are, giving them a safe place to make mistakes and learn from them, rather than creating permanent records that follow them forever.

Opportunities:

Establish youth governance and decision-making power

- Create new, or strengthen existing, youth leadership councils with real decision-making authority in program design, evaluation, hiring, and program development with youth governance requirements in all programs.
 - Implement youth-directed services where youth have genuine choice and authority in their own lives and future.

Reframe harmful narratives

- Eliminate deficit-based language and assumptions system-wide. Stop framing “emancipation” as failure and blaming youth for outcomes created by system failures.
 - Shift focus from what's wrong with youth to what's wrong with the system. Replace narratives labeling youth as “bad kids” with recognition of system failures and youth resilience in surviving them.
 - Adopt strength-based language in all communications: youth messaging emphasizing resilience and support availability, staff training on strength-based approaches, public messaging campaigns reframing foster care transitions, and legislative language reflecting developmental science. Embed “emancipation is not a failure” in all system messaging.
 - Stop using case files and past placements to judge youth. As youth stated: “Decisions and mistakes as a minor shouldn't hinder my resources.” Youth deserve opportunities to move forward, not to carry their case files as permanent records that limit their futures.

A PATH FORWARD

The voices in this report, from 205 young adults and over 120 staff across Texas, paint a picture of the barriers facing youth aging out of foster care, and in many cases, reinforce what research has shown us for over a decade about outcomes for young people with foster care experience.

Texas is in a unique position during the CBC transformation to leverage lessons learned and build on existing strengths while reimagining how we support transition-age youth. The question is not whether we can afford to implement these recommendations, but whether we can afford not to. Young people aging out of care deserve more than survival; they deserve the opportunity to thrive. While previous sections address barriers and opportunities at the program level, the following represent systemic-level changes that emerged from conversations with young adults and staff about infrastructure, coordination, and investment needed to make sustainable improvements possible.

- **Create true system coordination and reduce administrative burden.** As SSCCs establish and refine operations, regional variation has emerged in requirements, documentation, and procedures. While some variation reflects local needs, establishing universal guidelines on key policies, stipend deductions, documentation requirements, transition planning timelines, and terminology, would reduce confusion and administrative burden for providers working across multiple regions. As one provider noted: “SSCCs need to talk to each other and come up with like systems.” This requires collaborative development of statewide standardized policies, interstate coordination agreements, integrated data systems, and clarity about roles so staff can focus less on bureaucracy and more on social work.
- **Build strategic community partnerships and leverage existing assets.** No single entity can address employment, education, housing, mental health, and documentation challenges alone. Creating dedicated community partnership roles would build connections between agencies, providers, and resources. Strategic partnerships with employers could create paid internships and apprenticeships. Schools, universities, and community organizations could support

education, documentation, and services. This expands capacity and creates sustainable support networks rather than expecting SSCCs and programs to shoulder everything alone.

- **Center youth voice and collective responsibility.** These opportunities are actionable steps drawn from those navigating transitions every day. Some require policy changes and funding; others can begin immediately through shifts in practice and coordination. All require centering youth voice and recognizing that supporting young adults is an investment in our collective future. Youth outcomes depend not just on individual resilience, but on collective investment in systems and supports that make success possible.
- **Maximize federal funding and ensure sustainable provider capacity.** Ensure Texas does not leave federal money on the table because Title IV-E, Chafee, and Medicaid funds require state matching that hasn’t been appropriated. Provider funding gaps directly impact capacity, programs operate on rates that don’t reflect actual costs, forcing constant fundraising.

“Research estimates that if foster youth had the same outcomes as their peers, taxpayers would save \$4.1 billion annually.” Investment in support prevents higher costs in homelessness, healthcare, criminal justice, and lost economic productivity.¹⁸

Young people have a vision for their futures and there are providers and dedicated staff committed to helping them succeed, but infrastructure gaps, inadequate preparation, insufficient funding, and a system in transition create obstacles that individual resilience cannot overcome alone. The opportunities shared here range from immediate actions to ideas requiring further exploration and development, all drawn directly from those navigating and supporting these transitions every day. It’s important to acknowledge that policies and programs exist intended to prevent many of the barriers youth described, yet they are not working as intended. Some opportunities require policy changes and funding commitments; others call for reevaluating and strengthening existing practices that aren’t translating to youth experiences on the ground. Still others can begin immediately through shifts in coordination and prioritization. All require centering youth voice and recognizing that supporting young adults as they transition to independence is not just a child welfare responsibility, it is an investment in our communities and our collective future.

18 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Future Savings,” (2019) <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-futuresavings-2019.pdf>



tacfs.org/youth