



Public Policy Agenda

Foster Care Alumni of America is a foster care alumni-led, ally-supported organization. Our mission is to connect the voices of the foster care alumni community to transform policy and practice. Our policy agenda seeks to capture the expertise of our collective experiences and voices to advocate for foster care reform on the local, state, and federal levels. We seek to inform and educate key stakeholders about important policy issues pertaining to individuals in and from foster care. The following priority areas were chosen based on survey responses from Foster Care Alumni of America local and national chapters and leaders.

FCAA's Priority Areas:

1. **Housing Stability.** Every person who exits the foster care system will have access to affordable, stable housing.
2. **Higher Education.** Every person who has been in foster care has opportunities to attain higher education and training.
3. **Health and Mental Health.** All foster youth and alumni have access to mental and medical health care that is trauma-informed.
4. **Sex Trafficking Prevention.** Every youth in foster care is safe from becoming a victim of sex trafficking.
5. **Agng Out.** Every foster youth is eligible for extended care until the age of 21, and receives resources until the age of 26.
6. **LGBTQ Services and Support.** All LGBTQ youth and alumni in foster care have access to affirmative and supportive housing placements and services.
7. **Employment.** Every youth has access to job skills training before exiting foster care, and foster care alumni have access to sustainable employment options.
8. **Financial Stability.** Every youth should exit care with a savings account. Every alumni should have the opportunity to prosper financially.
9. **Sibling Connections.** Every youth in foster care has the ability to maintain strong sibling relationships while in care to support life-long connections and permanency.
10. **Child Welfare Finance Reform.** Child welfare funding should be more flexible to include prevention and post-reunification services with families of origin.

Implementation Suggestions for Policy Priorities:

1. Housing Stability: Create a preference for youth in affordable and low-income housing programs.

One in three young adults transitioning from foster care and one in two foster care alumni will experience homelessnessⁱ. Federal and local governments and communities should immediately address the root causes of homelessness among transition-age foster youth and alumni. Program development should focus on access to: 1) priority status in homelessness prevention services and low-income housing programs; 2) employment and education support; 3) early planning, saving, and financial stability; 4) emergency support; and 5) mentor and peer support.

2. Higher Education: Ensure that every foster youth and alumni can access higher education.

Every person who has been in foster care has a right to education. Currently, less than three percent of individuals who have been in foster care graduate from college with a bachelor's degree. Many foster youth and alumni struggle to find the supports necessary to access technical education programs, college, and various other degree programs. Education waivers should be available to cover the full costs of education programs for youth and alumni who wish to pursue higher education. States and institutions can enact loan forgiveness programs and free in-state tuition for youth and alumni seeking to continue their education.

3. Health/Mental Health: Provide access to trauma-informed mental and medical health resources for all youth and alumni.

Trauma related to entrance into and time in foster care can have lasting impacts on medical and mental health. The ACEs studyⁱⁱ shows that youth exposed to trauma have decreased health outcomes when compared to similarly-situated peers. Foster youth and alumni are likely to be within a subgroup of the population with a high ACEs score. All foster youth and alumni should have access to mental and medical health care that is trauma-informed. Trauma-informed health care is a necessary support to transition into adulthood. To ensure that this population has consistent care, Medicaid health insurance should be available to every current and former foster youth until the age of 26.

4. Sex Trafficking Prevention: Enact procedural protections, and specialized supports, for foster youth who are victims of human traffickers.

Youth in foster care are especially vulnerable to being sexually trafficked. The OLP Foundation found that 98 percent of children who identified as survivors of sex trafficking had some previous involvement with child welfare services.ⁱⁱⁱ Of these youth, many were still legally in care when a trafficker began victimizing them. Youth who are trafficked are victims. Local and state police agencies and child welfare agencies should develop screening tools to identify and assist victims of trafficking. A youth should never face criminal consequences for being a victim of trafficking. Specialized protocol should be enacted to respond to the specific safety and emotional needs of youth who have been trafficked.

5. Aging Out: Create comprehensive aging out resources for all current and former foster youth until age 26.

Aging out is a difficult process for many foster youth. After they age out of foster care, many youth and alumni find that they have very little support. To allow youth to develop independent living skills, all States should extend foster care until 21. Extended foster care allows youth the extra time to gain vital life skills, while they are transitioning into adulthood and establishing their career and education goals. However, a youth's need for support does not end at age 21. Ages 21-26 can be extremely difficult without an intact support system. Housing, medical, education and employment resources should be available to all youth until age 26.

6. LGBTQ Services and Supports: Ensure that all LGBTQ youth and alumni have access to affirming and supportive housing options and resources.

Placement into foster care should not further expose youth to trauma. LGBTQ youth and alumni should have access to appropriate resources that allow them to flourish. Youth who identify as LGBTQ should have access to supportive and affirming placements and services. Many youth are placed in homes and congregate care facilities where they feel unsafe if they are open about their LGBTQ identity. No youth should feel unsafe in a foster care placement. Practices such as reparative therapy should be banned. Religious exceptions should not be made for placements or caregivers. Every placement should be safe for LGBT youth.

7. Employment: Equip all current and former foster youth with job skills necessary to successfully transition into adulthood.

Every transition-age youth and foster care alumni should have access to viable, sustainable employment options. Acquiring job skills training and employment opportunities are imperative for establishing stability, because youth and alumni often lack financial support from family. Employment needs should be addressed and provided as part of transition planning for all youth in and from foster care. Furthermore, youth should have reasonable access to employment opportunities while still in foster care. Employment prior to transition from foster care allows a youth to develop financial stability and necessary career skills.

8. Financial Stability: Allow all youth in care access to banks accounts and matching programs. Promote financial prosperity among foster care alumni.

Opportunities to save money allow youth to plan for their future, create paths to permanency, and prevent housing instability. Youth often leave foster care without a bank account or savings account. While a youth is in foster care, the assigned social worker should create a savings account for a youth in transition planning. Youth should be able to contribute to their savings account. States and transition planning programs should offer savings account matching programs for youth upon a youth's transition date from foster care. Building solid financial foundations has broad implications for the life outcomes and trajectories of foster care alumni.

9. Siblings: Create and enact Sibling Bill of Rights in every state.

Siblings play a key role in the development of youth and young adults, and provide a source of permanency and support after leaving care. Often, youth are separated from their siblings when they enter foster care. Approximately two thirds of youth in foster care in the U.S. have a biological sibling who is also in care.^{iv} Separation from a sibling(s) is seen as an extra loss. Child welfare agencies can develop a legal framework that allows youth to maintain contact and healthy relationships with siblings. Youth have a right to maintain sibling relationships.

10. Child Welfare Finance Reform: Include funding for prevention and reunification services for families of origin in Child Welfare Financial Reform.

Title IV-E federal funds are uncapped, guaranteed funds that are distributed to states to support the financial costs of providing services to youth in foster care. Currently, Title IV-E funds can only be used to fund services for youth in foster care. Eligible costs include the costs of placement, therapeutic services, administrative costs, and some related training costs. However, these funds do not cover services provided to a family before a child is placed in foster care or services to pay for post-reunification services. This structure creates a financial incentive to place youth in foster care. Title IV-E funds must be more flexible. Flexibility in funding will increase supports that youth receive to avoid placement in foster care and increase the stability of post-care placements. Restructuring federal funding allows youth to have the best chances at achieving permanency.

ⁱ *Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest foster care alumni study.* Casey Family Programs, 2005.

ⁱⁱ A Felitti, Vincent J., et al. "Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study." *American journal of preventive medicine* 14.4 (1998): 245-258.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lillie, Michelle. "An Unholy Alliance: The Connection Between Foster Care and Human Trafficking." (2013).

^{iv} Webster, Daniel, et al. "The ties that bind II: Reunification for siblings in out-of-home care using a statistical technique for examining non-independent observations." *Children and Youth Services Review* 27.7 (2005): 765-782.

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