



Youth Transition Funders Group

# CONNECTED BY 25:

EFFECTIVE POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH



AN ISSUE BRIEF FOR YTFG MEMBERS: SPRING 2010

In an effort to strengthen philanthropic investments among its membership, the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) asked a group of policy experts to provide recommendations on how foundations can work to encourage effective policy solutions on issues affecting youth in transition to adulthood.<sup>1</sup> The primary challenge was to think beyond the systemic silos that so deeply shape the services and expectations of youth and move towards an overall framework that could produce improved outcomes.

YTFG's work is based on the Connected by 25 framework, in which all youth reach the following outcomes by age 25:

- > Educational achievement in preparation for career and community participation, including a high school diploma, post-secondary degree, and/or vocational certificate training
- > Gainful employment and/or access to career training to achieve life-long economic success
- > Connections to a positive support system—namely, guidance from family members and caring adults, as well as access to health, counseling, and mental health services
- > The ability to be a responsible and nurturing parent
- > The capacity to be actively engaged in the civic life of one's community

This issue brief offers a summary of those recommendations, focusing on four primary transition points that often threaten the ability for youth to be connected by age 25 to the institutions and support systems that help them succeed throughout life.

## I. THE RATE OF DISCONNECTION BETWEEN SYSTEMS AND THE YOUTH THEY SERVE

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In 2006, there were 21.7 million youth aged 14 to 18. By the time these individuals reach age 25, over 90 percent will have made at least a minimally successful transition into early adulthood—that is, they will have acquired the skills needed to connect with the labor force on a regular basis and they will have established positive social support systems.

However, at least 1.3 million of these youth (6 percent) are at high risk of not successfully transitioning to independent adulthood. At an age when most young adults are benefiting from full-time work and close interpersonal relationships, these youth will not have connected to the labor force; most will lack social support systems. About 60 percent will be men; of these, over half will be in prison, while the remaining young men will be mired in protracted spells of long-term unemployment. By age 25, nearly all of the young women will have started families; however, most of these young mothers will face the daunting challenge of raising their children alone and with little income, or with the help of their own impoverished families. Almost all of these youth will have spent their childhoods in families in the lowest third of the income distribution and will likely spend much of their own adult lives in poverty, unemployment, or marginal employment. From both an economic and social perspective, these young people will be “disconnected.”<sup>2</sup>

Developmentally, the transition to adulthood is challenging for all youth. Psychosocial and cognitive maturity develops over time during adolescence and young adulthood, and at different rates for different youth. Within society, almost all youth require support until they have connected successfully with the labor force, which generally does not occur until they reach their mid-twenties.

The transition to adulthood is changing rapidly due to the increased educational requirements of the economy and the economic downturn. In efforts to attain the necessary post-secondary credentials, young people today present a higher level of dependence on their families than in previous generations. Most young adults experience detours on the road

<sup>1</sup> YTFG extends special thanks to Shay Bilchik (Georgetown University), Carol Emig (Child Trends), Rob Geen (The Annie E. Casey Foundation), Laura Lippman (Child Trends), Jennifer Manlove (Child Trends), Kristin Moore (Child Trends), and Chris Sturgis (MetisNet) for sharing their expertise on youth policy and helping YTFG to identify key points for this issue brief. Associates at LM Strategies Consulting contributed to the completion of the policy brief, as well.

<sup>2</sup> See Public Impact (December 2008). *Youth at High Risk of Disconnection: A Data Update of Michael Wald and Tia Martinez's Connected by 25*; Retrieved from <http://www.ytfg.org/documents/Public20Impact20for20AEC20Disconnected20Youth20revised.pdf> on 7 October 2009.

to economic independence, including periods of unemployment and periodic interruptions in their education. Youth with the necessary support, both emotional and financial, will be more likely to make a successful transition. It is also important to note that even under the best of circumstances, some youth take longer than others to make the transition successfully.

Moreover, the group of youth labeled as “vulnerable” is quite heterogeneous, demographically, in the circumstances that place them at risk of long-term disconnection as well as in the probability that they will ultimately make a successful transition to adulthood. Risk factors are not life sentences, and developmental timelines are not uniform across individuals. These truths provide a number of opportunities to intervene and to change a dangerous trajectory. Many vulnerable youth can and will overcome obstacles, recover from missteps, and ultimately be connected by age 25. In fact, although 20 percent of all youth will become at risk of disconnection at some time before reaching the age of 25, only 6 percent will reach age 25 without connecting in a meaningful way to employment and social support systems.

## **WHO IS AT RISK?: UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENS AS YOUTH MAKE THEIR WAY TO AGE 25<sup>3</sup>**

### ***Youth Between the Ages of 14 and 18***

Virtually all youth not connected by age 25 begin the process of disconnection much earlier, usually before age 18. Most who become disconnected young adults fall into one of four risk groups between ages 14 and 18:

- > Native-born youth not enrolled in school and not holding a high school diploma
- > Unmarried, teenage mothers
- > Youth who have been in foster care between their 14th and 19th birthdays
- > Youth deeply involved in the juvenile justice system

In 2006, there were 21.7 million youth aged 14 to 18. Of these, 1.3 million (6 percent) were at high risk for disconnection as estimated by their inclusion in at least one of the four high-risk categories. Further compounding the issue is the higher risk for youth of certain demographics:

- > Among 18 year olds, 1 in 10 individuals is at high risk for disconnection.
- > African American, Hispanic, and Native American youth are all disproportionately overrepresented in each of the four high-risk categories and are at especially high risk of becoming disconnected.
- > While females constitute disproportionately low portions of the foster, dropout, and incarcerated populations, when you include unmarried motherhood among the risk factors, females then make up the majority of the total at-risk population.

### ***Youth Between the Ages of 19 and 24***

Youth aged 14 to 18 are not the only ones at risk. In 2006, there were approximately 25 million youth aged 19 to 24. Of those, slightly more than 2 million (9 percent) were disconnected, and this number is expected to increase to over 2.5 million by 2030. Populations of youth within this age range at particularly high risk include:

- > Male, African American, and Hispanic youth are unemployed at a rate more than twice their representation in the U.S. population and are disproportionately overrepresented among disconnected youth between the ages of 19 and 24.
- > Youth without a high school diploma or equivalent, though constituting only 13 percent of the population, make up nearly half (43 percent) of the disconnected youth population between the ages of 19 and 24.
- > Youth aged 19 to 24 with less than a high school education also constitute more than half (52 percent) of the prison population.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The social and economic costs of failing to address the needs of vulnerable youth far outweigh the investments necessary to reduce the number of youth who become disconnected. Policymakers need to be concerned about and develop approaches for addressing the needs of both those at risk of disconnection and those who become

disconnected as young adults. While the benefits achieved for vulnerable youth could be enormous, we must also understand that these youth are also the parents of tomorrow's children. Stabilizing today's group of vulnerable youth is really an intergenerational investment.

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## II. UNDERSTANDING THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT FOR A VULNERABLE YOUTH AGENDA

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One of the biggest contributing factors to the success of grantmakers in impacting children, families, and communities is in the advancement of effective policy solutions that support their investments. Changes in the White House, Congress, Governors' Offices, and State Legislatures suggest new opportunities to further a vulnerable youth agenda. Below are suggested policy priorities for meeting the needs of youth most at risk of becoming disconnected. The recommendations regarding the ensuing policy priorities are guided by three key observations; all may provide opportunities to further the vulnerable youth agenda.

**Policy is made in silos and will continue to be made in silos.** While philanthropy would like to see a coordinated and comprehensive youth policy, it must also recognize the reality that policy is made through committees (both at the federal and state levels) and is influenced by advocates and special interests that are more narrowly focused. It is unlikely that policies for vulnerable youth will be advanced through a global approach that addresses the needs of youth served by different systems. Nevertheless, it will be important to consistently reference a common framework for supporting vulnerable youth within discussions of specific groups of youth and specific systems of care. Similarly, it will be important to consistently note the overlap of populations across systems: youth involved in one system are often involved in another system, as well, and their core needs are the same, regardless of the system they are in.

**Opportunities for success are greatest at the state and local levels.** Most of the systems that serve at-risk youth are primarily state or locally administered, and not overly burdened by federal restrictions, despite protests to the contrary by some state and local administrators. While there are important federal reforms needed, there is much that states can accomplish within the existing federal policy structure. There is typically considerable flexibility for states to tailor the implementation of federal programs to meet local needs. Moreover, many federal programs allow states to opt in or out of key provisions that expand federal support, though they typically require additional state investments, as well. States must carefully assess the opportunities they have in existing federal programming to improve their support for vulnerable youth. In addition, states can significantly improve existing youth-serving programs by focusing on the guiding principles discussed in Appendix A or by redirecting funds from poorly designed programs to those that are based on lessons learned from youth development and evidence-based practices.

There is typically considerable flexibility for states to tailor the implementation of federal programs to meet local needs.

**Opportunities at the federal level should not be ignored.** While policy and programmatic changes at the state and local levels are most promising, opportunities at the federal level should not be ignored. There are youth advocates who believe the new administration and the economic downturn actually provide a unique window of opportunity to advance social causes. Additionally, several key federal programs are scheduled for reauthorization in the coming year and may well provide a vehicle for significant policy reform.

### III. POLICY PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF STRUGGLING STUDENTS

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In an age when there is increased focus on attaining college credentials, there are still many students who are struggling to complete their high school diplomas. It is critical that grantmakers align reform efforts to increase college and career readiness while simultaneously increasing graduation rates. To do one without the other leads to increased inequity and failure to improve global competitiveness. Furthermore, the “second chance” system that has been relied on so heavily for the past thirty years needs to be upgraded with the twenty-first century economy in mind. Youth employment programming should be fully upgraded to offer a continuum of blended work and learning opportunities that lead to post-secondary education, training, and industry certificates.

Students struggle to complete their diplomas for many reasons, including entering ninth grade without adequate skills, needing to work or care for their families, and sometimes simply deciding that the quality of education they are receiving is not relevant to their future. Additionally, youth under the care of child welfare and juvenile justice have noticeably lower graduation rates.

No matter what the reason for students failing to graduate, they are faced with an education system that is not designed to help them get back on track. High schools are still operating according to outdated approaches that fail to meet individual student needs. It is necessary to balance philanthropic efforts that align the K–12 system and higher education with the realities of young people’s lives.

#### POLICY OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS AGENCY SILOS

Addressing disconnection through increased education and employment requires policy changes beyond the K–12 system. With federal inter-agency leadership, it is possible to reduce the size of the disconnected youth population through coordinated efforts. Policy goals to achieve this include:

- > **Keeping Students “On Track” to Graduation.** Establish a high priority on increasing graduation rates by keeping students on track to graduation and reforming the lowest-performing high schools.
- > **Getting Students Back “On Track.”** Expand recuperative capacity (alternative schools) to provide students with opportunities to graduate regardless of whether they are in school or out of school.
- > **Re-Engaging Youth by Expanding Educational and Employment Pathways.** For youth who have aged out of the K–12 system, programming must be upgraded and expanded. For example, GED programs need to be revised so that they offer a high-quality college prep curriculum and transitional programming into community colleges.

Across all three of these policy goals, foundations can be helpful by supporting coordinated efforts to look beyond the bureaucratic silos and explore new roles and relationships. For example, it will be important to have coherent policies across Education, Labor, Justice, and Health and Human Services that focus on:

- > **Establishing an Educational Safety Net to Re-Engage Youth.** In addition to the strong youth development programming offered, community colleges can play a critical role in delivering diploma-granting programs that address remediation needs and credit accrual through accelerated competency-based instruction. Adult basic education and youth employment programs can work hand in hand to re-engage those youth burdened by low literacy and limited work experience. Most importantly, districts can play a critical role in expanding their portfolio of options to offer adequate alternative education for young people who are disengaging from school.
- > **Adopting Cross-Sector Data Systems that Monitor Getting Young People Back “On Track.”** The efforts to create K-16 data systems lack one critical element—that is, monitoring effectiveness in establishing an educational safety net. This safety net would draw on a variety of programs in order to meet the diverse needs

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of youth who still need help re-connecting. Monitoring it will require the ability to draw together data from K–12, adult education, youth employment, community colleges, and employment to determine how effectively youth are being re-engaged. States play the strongest policy role in shaping opportunities for young people without a diploma. Specifically, the new Race to the Top competition requires states to think through many of the policy elements described. However, creating an accountability system for the educational safety net is the highest leverage policy.<sup>4</sup>

## FEDERAL POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

There are also critical roles that federal legislation can play in shaping overall policy for addressing the dropout crisis and establishing an educational safety net that leads to gainful employment. The anticipated reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Workforce Investment Act provide unique opportunities to expand and upgrade educational and career pathways for youth.

Recommended policy changes include:

- > ***Efforts to Support Redesigning the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).*** The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known under the previous administration as the “No Child Left Behind Act,” introduced the policy of students meeting a set of academic standards across all 50 states, yet it barely addressed high schools.

As ESEA is re-visited, it is critical to ensure that a strong high school focus is designed to:

1. Establish a full graduation policy with the expectation that districts are responsible for providing schooling for students who fall “off track” to graduation, for re-engaging youth who have had their education disrupted through life events, and for offering rapid re-enrollment for youth who have dropped out at any point.
  2. Aggressively increase the “on-track” graduation rate through a strong focus on improving middle schools, facilitating the transition to ninth grade, directing high-quality teachers to students with the greatest academic challenges, implementing early warning and response systems, and providing comprehensive support. Efforts to reform the lowest-performing high schools should start with a combination of “head start to high school” programming to ensure that young people have adequate skills. Efforts can include the expansion of alternative schools to act as a safety net as the process of comprehensive school reform is initiated.
  3. Put the educational needs of “off-track” students and students who have dropped out squarely within high school policy with incentives for competency-based learning. It is also necessary to begin monitoring four-year and extended graduation rates as well as to expand alternative schools to meet these needs.
  4. Implement appropriate accountability systems for high schools that include extended graduation rates, which will weigh how well high schools serve struggling and “off-track” students. In addition, specialized accountability mechanisms are required for alternative schools.
- > ***Expanding Employment and Training Programs under the Workforce Investment Act.*** Under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), youth employment policies have not been revised since 2003. In fact, the funding has been decreased to the degree that it is serving less than 5 percent of youth deemed eligible for services. In addition to significant expansion of services, policies need to be revised to address the range of educational skills that youth must have in their efforts to attach to the labor market and the increased expectation that everyone will, at some point in their careers, be accessing post-secondary education and training. Those programs

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Race to the Top Fund, go to the following website: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>.

aimed at in-school youth should be driven by early warning and response systems to ensure that those students most in need of services benefit. WIA's one-stop centers can play a critical role in outreach to help re-engage youth in collaborations with school districts.<sup>5</sup>

## **OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF STRUGGLING STUDENTS**

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), which are discussed in detail below, provide unique opportunities to increase alignment across school districts and public agencies to help our most vulnerable youth in foster care and juvenile detention take advantage of multiple pathways to graduation and post-secondary options.

To expedite alignment across school districts and public agencies, funders should consider ways to invest in local and state efforts that prioritize policies for:

- > Ensuring school stability and continuity for youth in foster care, allowing youth to remain in the same school irrespective of placement changes, if possible, or working to promptly transfer the records for youth who need to change schools.
- > Developing effective protocols for re-entry into educational settings for juveniles released from custody, including appropriate transfer of records, credits, and timely re-enrollment.
- > Embedding the educational needs of foster and court-involved youth who are “off track” to graduation squarely within high school design.

<sup>5</sup> For information on the One-Stop Centers, go to [www.servicelocator.org](http://www.servicelocator.org).

## IV. POLICY PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF PREGNANT AND PARENTING TEENS

Because there is no specific system designed to meet the needs of pregnant and parenting teens, policy opportunities arise in a number of youth-serving programs. A few priorities include:

### **EXPANDING FUNDING AND SCOPE OF SERVICES FOR TITLE XX OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT**

Title XX of the Social Security Act could be extended to provide services for additional populations, age groups, and outcomes. For example, Title XX could be amended to extend the age requirements for young parents (currently capped for enrollment until age 19) until the mid-twenties, as needed. Title XX could also be amended to expand performance measures—which are currently limited to reducing repeat teen pregnancy and increasing educational attainment and child immunization—to also include broader employment, parenting, mental health, and civic outcomes.

Funding for Title XX has been flat for the past decade, and current funding supports only 31 programs for pregnant and parenting teens. Additional funding could be allocated to programs across all states with provisions for services to hard-to-reach populations, such as teens in rural communities.

### **MAKING TANF MORE ACCESSIBLE TO MINOR TEEN PARENTS**

Current Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) legislation has strict eligibility requirements for minor teenage parents, including enrollment and residency requirements. Researchers have found that many minor teenage parents are turned away from TANF because they do not meet these requirements. States could be encouraged to provide alternatives to the family residency requirement (such as approved housing facilities for teenage mothers) and to coordinate with other community services to ensure that teenage mothers have adequate child care available in order to meet enrollment requirements.

States could also offer transitional TANF services to minor teenage parents, allowing them to receive services while they work with a case worker to meet residency and enrollment requirements, as has been implemented in Illinois.

Under TANF rules for educational enrollment among minor teenage parents, states could combine sanctions with incentives, services, and supports in order to help minor teenage parents meet educational targets. For example, California's Cal-Learn program (which requires teenage parents under age 19 who have not completed high school to enroll in school) combines bonuses for receiving passing grades with sanctions for failing grades in order to help promote school completion. Cal-Learn also provides child care, transportation services, and case management, as well as housing services for those who cannot live with their parents.

### **MAKING TEEN AND YOUNG PARENTS A PRIORITY GROUP**

Young parents have additional needs due to the children for whom they are responsible. Increased access to parenting education, child care, Early Head Start and Head Start, and relationship education can help to ensure the development of these children and ultimately interrupt the cycle of poverty.

In addition, making reproductive health services more accessible and affordable could reduce rapid repeat childbearing, which would allow more resources for the first child and allow the parents time to build their educational skills and attain a degree of economic stability.

### **EXPANDING RESOURCES FOR YOUNG FATHERS**

Current programs utilized by teenage mothers need to better integrate teen and young adult fathers. For example, only 5 percent of participants in California's support program for teenage parents (Cal-SAFE) are fathers. In addition, while Title XX requires some outreach to fathers, the use of services varies across programs. Thus, state and federal programs for teenage parents should expand their outreach to young fathers, including programs to increase father involvement with children, parenting skills, and educational and employment services.

In addition, because many of the fathers of children born to teenage mothers are in their early twenties, expanding services to young adult fathers may improve successful transitions to adulthood among men, as well as to improve outcomes among children of young parents.

## V. POLICY PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Both federal and state policymakers can have a significant impact on ensuring that youth in and aging out of foster care are connected by age 25. Recent federal legislation, such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, provides states with significant opportunities to assess and address the needs of youth in foster care. Effective state implementation of this legislation may be the best opportunity to having a far-reaching impact on youth in foster care.

Effective state implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act may be the best opportunity to having a far-reaching impact on youth in care.

That said, it is important to note that additional federal legislation may be needed to increase the flexibility states have in allocating federal resources, and to make states more accountable for outcomes. In addition, state policymakers can encourage a number of the system reforms highlighted below.

### FEDERAL POLICY OPPORTUNITIES: FOSTERING CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS AND INCREASING ADOPTIONS ACT

In October 2008, Congress passed and the President signed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Public Law 110-351), the most significant federal child welfare reform for youth in foster care in more than a decade. Yet the legislation did not address what many experts believe is a fundamental flaw in the federal child welfare financing structure: funds for foster care and adoption are open-ended, while funds for all other purposes are capped at a relatively low level. In addition to opportunities in the financing structure, federal legislation could take further steps to require states to track the outcomes of youth and to encourage states to develop plans for improving outcomes.

Recommended policy changes include efforts to support:

- > **Financing Reform.** With an IV-E uncapped entitlement and IV-B capped (and at a relatively low level), researchers and advocates have noted that states lack any financial incentive to achieve the child welfare goals of keeping families together and ensuring timely permanency for children removed from their homes. In the current model, reducing the number of children in foster care only reduces the amount of federal revenue states receive. Numerous legislative proposals have been floated to provide states greater flexibility in their use of IV-E dollars, as well as options to reinvest “savings” achieved through reductions in foster care.

With greater fiscal flexibility and incentives, states may be more likely to seek innovative ways to keep youth from coming into the foster care system in the first place (most youth who age out of foster care enter as teenagers), or to invest in strategies to return youth to the care of their parents more quickly. A sizable proportion of the youth entering foster care do so for reasons other than abuse or neglect (e.g., parent-child conflict), and there is a growing evidence base for the effectiveness of programs that address youth behavioral issues without removing children from their homes.

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- > **Accountability.** The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 required Health and Human Services (HHS) to:

1. Develop outcome measures (including measures of educational attainment, high school diploma, employment, avoidance of dependency, homelessness, nonmarital childbirth, incarceration, and high-risk behaviors) that can be used to assess the performance of states in operating independent living programs;
2. Identify data elements needed to track the number and characteristics of children receiving services, type and quantity of services being provided, and state performance on the outcome measures; and
3. Develop and implement a plan to collect the needed information.

Health and Human Services completed the process of developing outcome measures and the data elements in 2001. A plan for implementing the state performance assessment, called the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), was submitted to Congress in September of 2001. However, the final rule for implementing the NYTD was not published until February of 2008. Moreover, no new funds have been made available for states to assist them in meeting the new requirements, and states that do not comply with the new regulation face a fine that may be smaller than the cost of complying with the regulation. Thus, states may choose to simply accept the fine and not attempt to track outcomes of youth experiencing foster care.

Federal legislation could address the problem by making Health and Human Services directly responsible for collecting outcome data, providing states the resources necessary to track youth outcomes, offering greater technical assistance to states in meeting the requirements, and/or imposing more severe penalties for not complying.

- > **Reauthorization of Key Programs (JJDP, WIA, ESEA, TANF).** The needs of youth in foster care are often not considered by other systems until and unless child welfare advocates identify ways in which policies can have a positive or unintended negative effect on youth in care. Several key federal social net programs are scheduled for reauthorization in the near future, and although these programs do not specifically target youth in foster care, each can be shaped to help states achieve positive outcomes for youth in foster care.

Impending efforts to reform health care, reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), and revisit provisions in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act can enhance how we serve the needs of foster youth. To assist with coordination across systems of care, funders should consider ways to invest in local and state efforts in coordination with these key programs that prioritize policies for:

1. Ensuring school stability and continuity for youth in foster care, allowing youth to remain in the same school irrespective of placement changes, if possible, or working to promptly transfer the records for youth who need to change schools.
2. Expanding the use of promising pediatric and adolescent health care practices to improve continuity in health care for foster youth who may move from one placement to another or transition out of care. Such practices include the American Academy of Pediatrics' "Medical Home" model and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau's "Healthy and Ready to Work" initiative for youth transitioning to adulthood.
3. Making use of Chafee Act funds to assist foster youth with educational achievement, including high school/GED completion or post-secondary instruction.

## STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Child welfare agencies are primarily state-run systems. While the federal government provides much of the funding and offers a host of program and practice guidelines, state and local child welfare agencies set individual policy and programmatic priorities.

Thus, it is policy change at the state level that is most likely to have a dramatic impact on youth in foster care. Foundations can play a unique role in making sure that state policymakers are aware of and have access to best practices for:

- > **Implementing Public Law 110-351.** Although the new federal legislation provides new resources and requirements to assist youth in foster care to make a transition to adulthood, states' implementation of the Act will determine whether outcomes for youth are improved. In particular, each state must determine:
  1. If and how it will take advantage of federal reimbursement for foster care payments made on behalf of children who remain in custody past the age of 18;
  2. How it will continue to support permanency for youth approaching or past the age of 18;
  3. If and how it will allow youth who exit care at age 18 to return to state custody to obtain needed supports, including permanency planning, if desired;
  4. How it will make reasonable efforts to provide notice to relatives about a youth's placement in foster care; and

5. How it will develop permanency-focused, youth-centered transition plans for those who will be leaving care—giving attention to efforts to train staff, fully engage youth, and assess performance in the transition planning process.

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Allowing youth to remain in foster care past age 18 (or allowing them to come back into care after they have left) will require the investment of new state funds. Yet there is compelling evidence which suggests that youth who remain in care longer have better outcomes as they transition to adulthood. In addition, simply allowing youth to stay in, or return to, state custody does not mean that youth will. States that want to encourage youth to stay connected to child welfare agencies will need to develop protocols and train staff in talking with

youth about the benefits of remaining in care.

- > **Using Existing Independent Living Program (ILP) Dollars More Effectively.** In 1999, Congress doubled the federal funding available to support independent living programs designed to assist youth likely to age out of foster care. While research and data are limited, the available evidence suggests that states may not be using these funds effectively. States need to assess their ILP programs and determine how to:
  1. Engage youth who typically do not access voluntary services;
  2. Use funds to leverage other available resources for youth in foster care; and
  3. Target investments to program models that have some evidence base for achieving the outcomes sought.
- > **Advancing Family Foster Care Reforms.** For most youth, birth parents take on the primary responsibility for preparing youth for the transition to adulthood. For example, birth parents may:
  1. Give youth allowances and help them set up bank accounts so they can learn how to save and manage money;
  2. Encourage youth to seek summer or after-school employment to teach them work skills; or
  3. Require youth to volunteer in their community or religious institution to give them a sense of civic responsibility.

Foster parents are the adults with whom youth in care spend the largest amount of their time, and are thus in the best position to assist youth in developing life skills and gaining experiences that are essential for their future independence. As much as the child welfare system fails youth in foster care by placing low expectations on them, the system may fail youth in care even more by setting such low expectations on the foster parents who care for them.

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Many state and local child welfare agencies have great difficulty in recruiting and retaining foster parents willing to (let alone excited to) care for older children. Because of the lack of homes for older youth in care, and because youth often fail in foster homes that are not recruited or trained to specifically work with older youth, many youth end up in group or residential settings. It seems unlikely that child welfare agencies will have a significant impact on the outcomes of youth in foster care unless and until they can make significant improvements in how foster parents are recruited and supported.

## VI. POLICY PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF YOUTH INVOLVED WITH JUVENILE CORRECTIONS

Among all of the policy areas affecting vulnerable children and families, juvenile justice probably suffers the most glaring gaps between best practice and common practice. The most urgent need is to reduce the wasteful, counter-productive over-reliance on incarceration and detention, and instead to redirect resources into proven strategies that cost less, enhance public safety, and increase the success of youth who come in contact with the juvenile courts. Reducing racial disparities and combating abuse in juvenile facilities also require immediate attention.

While juvenile justice is largely a state and local responsibility, the federal government can and should make a crucial contribution. Often, states and localities lack the financial resources and technical know-how to reform their juvenile programs and practices, and they have long looked to Washington for guidance. Indeed, since the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) was passed in 1974, Washington has often played a vital role in setting minimum standards, conducting and disseminating research on best practices, and providing funding to help states and localities improve their juvenile systems.

With the landmark JJDPA up for reauthorization, the field has an unparalleled opportunity to use the resources and influence of the federal government to jump start a long-overdue renaissance in the nation's approach to adolescent crime.

To expedite alignment across evidenced-based solutions, federal policy, and state implementation, funders should consider ways to help communities focus on the following priorities as JJDPA is revisited:

- > **Restoring OJJDP.** Restore the capacity of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to serve as a national incubator and catalyst for improving juvenile justice policies and practices. Since 2000, total federal juvenile justice funding declined by nearly 60 percent, and the budget for OJJDP's core research and dissemination efforts was slashed 90 percent from \$6.8 million to just \$700,000.
- > **Focusing the Energy and Resources of OJJDP and Other Federal Agencies on Crucial and Pervasive Shortcomings in Juvenile Justice Practice.** This includes efforts to:
  1. Combat over-reliance on training school incarceration and pre-trial detention.
  2. Take aggressive steps to reduce racial disparities in juvenile justice.
  3. Combat abuse and protect the safety of youth confined in juvenile facilities.
  4. Limit the number of youth tried in adult courts.
  5. Conduct research and support demonstration projects to address other pervasive weaknesses in juvenile justice systems.
  6. Strengthen JJDPA core requirements aimed at preventing the confinement of status offenders and keeping youthful offenders and adult offenders separate.
- > **Improving the Juvenile Justice Workforce.** OJJDP should provide assistance to states in recruiting, training, and retaining juvenile justice workers. This includes providing support for partnerships between state agencies and universities that offer a career track for college students into the juvenile justice field as well as internship experience and tuition subsidies for college students who commit to working for a juvenile justice agency within the state for a minimum number of years.

## **BEYOND THE JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION ACT**

As stated previously, leveraging the provisions of several federal social net programs is critical to facilitating successful outcomes for vulnerable youth, including those involved in the juvenile justice system. Impending efforts to reform health care, implement the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, and revisit provisions in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act can provide openings to ensure that juvenile offenders receive rehabilitation and re-entry supports.

With that in mind, funders with an interest in re-entry supports should consider ways to invest in local and state efforts for:

- > Developing effective protocols for re-entry into educational settings for juveniles released from custody, including appropriate transfer of records, credits, and timely re-enrollment.
- > Suspending, instead of terminating, Medicaid eligibility for incarcerated juvenile offenders who will have the opportunity to re-enter their communities, thus guarding against a gap in coverage.

## VII. THE ROLE OF FOUNDATIONS IN SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE POLICY SOLUTIONS

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Foundations interested in supporting effective policy solutions can target philanthropic resources to different aspects of the policy development process, including problem definition, agenda setting, policy adoption, policy implementation, and evaluation/assessment of policies.

Historically, foundations have invested more heavily in the early stages of policy development (problem definition and agenda setting) than in the latter stages (policy adoption and implementation).

This has been due in part to concerns about IRS prohibitions on foundation support for lobbying activities, but it is also due to a lack of understanding of how philanthropic investments—and the lessons learned from those investments in the early stages—can play a role in policy action.

Foundations can choose to employ a wide variety of strategies to support policy changes for vulnerable youth, and while some strategies are most successful at a specific point of policy development, most can be effective at multiple points.

Some strategies target the general public, though most target decision makers or those who more directly influence decision makers.

### THE SHORT LIST

Since several grantmakers in the Youth Transition Funders Group have already invested considerable resources in strategies to define and educate communities about the problem, new investments are perhaps best targeted at finalizing a policy change agenda and securing movement on the adoption of new policies through building coalitions, convening stakeholders, and policy research and analysis.

Particularly at the state and local levels, grantmakers should consider grant support for the effective implementation of policies that are already in place, giving special attention to leadership development, model legislation, toolkits, and technical assistance.

That said, grantmakers have to realize that outcomes and impact are not only dependent on dollars spent but also on how successful foundations are at the craft of leveraging relationships, influencing the field, and supporting innovation.

The following recommendations are a short list of key strategies for making use of philanthropic resources (financial or otherwise) to bring evidence-based policy solutions to scale and spur the adoption of new policies that work in the best interest of all youth.

**1 Take advantage of philanthropy's convening power.** Information sharing and peer dialogue matter, especially for decision makers inundated with new reports, constituent demands, and multiple priorities to address. Foundations often have the resources to convene stakeholders—across political affiliations, organizational roles, and geographic locations—to make sure decision makers have the best information and access to key individuals to stay updated on what works. Face-to-face convenings encourage a community of practice that can be essential for taking proven solutions to scale.

**2 Support cross-systems coordination and alliance building at the local and state levels.** Since most public systems are state or locally administered, grantmakers should think strategically about how their grants can help build the infrastructure for cross-systems coordination to take place in local communities or regional areas. If local and state agencies have not been able to stay connected and work together, foundations can often play a role in building that capacity on the ground. Cross-systems coordination and alliance building are critical for all youth, but especially for youth affected by multiple systems of care.

**3 Continue to fund critical research but ramp up efforts to get the lessons learned and findings in the public square.** Defining the problem is key on the journey to finding solutions. In particular, the breadth and depth of research on vulnerable youth have changed the nature of the field's conversations with the general public, voters, and policymakers over the past five years—and in a positive way. Yet, the lessons learned must translate into effective policy solutions that are scaled and properly implemented. Foundations need to get serious about not just making the case for a vulnerable youth agenda, but also in conveying the message through words and media that inform (and perhaps shift) the nature of the dialogue in the public square.

**4 Invest in demonstration projects.** If research and analysis have produced sound evidence that a change in policy can improve outcomes of youth, grantmakers should consider funding a small-scale demonstration project to test promising models in communities. Innovation often happens from the ground up. Examples of cities and states that have been able to tackle challenges, implement better policies, and improve outcomes for youth are legion. Plus, local and state efforts sometimes become beacons for improvements in federal policies and legislation, as well.

**5 Avoid isolation.** Grantees are not the only ones who need to stay connected to be successful in their work. Funders do as well. They should consider the benefits of reaching out to other like-minded funders in a proactive, consistent way. Beyond the value of building professional relationships, philanthropic affinity groups and collaboratives help expedite learning and can provide opportunities to leverage investments in coordination with other grantmakers. Collaborative philanthropic efforts can also help to spread risk, focus efforts, and enable comprehensive reform.

## FROM THE FIELD: EXAMPLES OF FOUNDATION INVESTMENTS

Below are four examples of foundation investments that have been successful in advancing the vulnerable youth agenda. The featured foundations vary in size, focus, and scope. However, each profile shares highlights on how the strategies from the short list can work in communities.

### *The Tow Foundation*

The Tow Foundation exemplifies what a small family foundation can accomplish when it directs its resources, funding, and leadership towards a set of clear goals. A decade ago, the foundation saw an opportunity to work with advocates to influence reform of Connecticut's juvenile justice system. Data from the late 1990s showed that the state relied heavily on arresting, detaining, and incarcerating delinquent youth up to age 16, particularly minorities. Annually, court referrals of delinquency cases averaged more than 16,000; 2,000 youth were sent to detention and 700 were committed to the state for residential placement, including the juvenile training school. An independent evaluation of the state-contracted alternative, community-based services found youth outcomes unimpressive and most of the programs were closed.

The Tow Foundation's board decided that staff time and strategic investments could have major impact on the lives of high-risk and high-need youth and families who had largely been neglected by other funders. The staff took on the task of meeting and getting to know key state policymakers and visited most of the juvenile facilities in Connecticut to speak with staff and youth. Focus groups were held with service providers, advocates, government leaders, and other foundations involved in advocacy on a variety of social issues. A strategy evolved for The Tow Foundation that has borne tremendous fruit, including collegial relationships with policymakers working toward the same goal: fewer youth in the justice system and more on track to success.

Today, delinquency referrals to Juvenile Court are down more than 20 percent, detention admissions have decreased by nearly 30 percent, and the average number of youth committed to the state for residential placement has dropped by 60 percent. The state has invested millions more dollars in evidence-based mental health, education, vocational, and family support services at the community level to divert youth from the justice system and to ease the transition back home for those who must serve their time.

Connecticut has reassessed its approach to juvenile justice with increased attention to rehabilitation rather than punishment only, at a savings for taxpayers. Evidence of this philosophical change is the adoption of a strategic juvenile justice plan for the state and the passage of three major laws: one will raise the age that young people are legally treated as juveniles from 16 to 18, in line with most other states; another keeps status offenders (truants, runaways, and those beyond control of their parents) out of delinquency court; and a third limits out-of-school suspensions.

The Tow Foundation has played a critical role in building the advocacy infrastructure in Connecticut, from funding partner agencies producing research reports that highlighted the flaws in the state's arrest and detention policies and the decisions of judges, to being a founding member and initial funder of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance. The Alliance's 19-member steering committee represents a cross-section of policymakers, advocates, providers, and parent leaders. It guides Alliance staff on reform efforts and strategies. Both Alliance staff and steering committee members, including those from The Tow Foundation, serve on various state-initiated committees that have worked on major policy goals—including diversion projects, girls services, disproportionate minority contact, and school discipline policies. The Juvenile Justice Alliance has helped to mobilize stakeholders at crucial moments through organizing efforts and media campaigns, as well as Educate the Legislature rallies and programs at the state capitol that have featured nationally respected researchers and advocates.

In addition to its advocacy efforts, The Tow Foundation sees value in investing in direct services that could influence juvenile justice practices in the state. For example, its multi-year investment in dance and drumming classes for youth committed to three juvenile detention centers helped improve the youth's relationship with detention staff and change the culture in the centers, according to staff testimony. The staff advocated strongly for expansion of the services and, as a result, the state took over funding of the program and tripled the budget to add classes at three more facilities.

The Tow Foundation knows that just getting new reforms passed is not enough. With the burden of the economic crisis, Connecticut is considering deferring some of the reforms. The Tow Foundation and its partners are preparing to work through the long haul to assure the reforms they support are implemented and sustained.

### ***William Penn Foundation***

After years of seeing its systemic efforts at school reform in Philadelphia stymied by chronic district budget crises, the William Penn Foundation realized that it needed to address the underlying structural school funding issues if it wanted to see its reforms taken to scale. Philadelphia's chronic deficits were rooted in a frozen state funding formula that capped funding rather than basing it on the number of children in a district or their level of need. Without the resources to respond to an increasing population and higher concentrations of high-need students, student outcomes on all measures (including graduation) plummeted to all-time lows.

The William Penn Foundation focused its attention on building public will to reform school funding in Pennsylvania through investments in community organizing and community engagement designed to substantially increase the understanding of this complicated educational issue. This strategy produced a state-of-the-art cost of education study in 2007, the recommendations of which were adopted by the legislature in 2008. The next challenge is to make sure that this new education financing formula receives adequate appropriations through a sustained public will and advocacy effort.

As a way to balance its state policy work, the foundation began to work with national funders—including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation—through YTFG to shape an effort to address the dropout crisis. With pooled funding supporting them, the Philadelphia Youth Network and a coalition of partners designed Project U-Turn, which has since become highly influential in shaping local, state, and national policy. Using research, coalition building, and communications to shape a city-wide strategy, Project U-Turn has focused the city's attention on improving high schools and recovering students who were dropping out of school. The strategy balanced a focus on high school improvement (re-inventing ninth grade, expansion of Student Success Centers, and intensifying the focus on adolescent literacy) with increasing the capacity to help students get back on track (increasing the number of alternative schools, developing a new "accelerated school" model

for students with few or no credits, and a system of re-engagement programming delivered by E3—Education, Employment, and Empowerment—Centers).

Project U-Turn played a pivotal role in refining the new statewide school funding formula. While the methodology involved sophisticated sampling and research-based strategies, it did not initially incorporate additional costs associated with preventing at-risk youth from dropping out of high school. After this omission was brought to the state's attention, additional steps were undertaken to enhance the methodology to take into account these school district costs, and to ensure that they were included in the final adequacy figures. In addition, the accomplishments of Project U-Turn are being integrated into state policy through the Department of Labor's support of replication in eight sites, thereby shaping the state's dropout recovery efforts.

To continue influencing state policy related to dropouts and disconnected youth, the William Penn Foundation provides support to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) and the Philadelphia Youth Network to engage in policy and advocacy work. In the fall of 2009, they mounted a statewide campaign to build Commonwealth support for research-based effective strategies to re-engage and re-connect out-of-school youth to high-quality educational options and meaningful employment opportunities.

### ***Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative***

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (Jim Casey Youth) is a systems change initiative that promotes policy improvement and conducts 11 demonstration projects across the country. Although changing the policies, practices, and funding patterns of multiple systems is challenging, its work is one of the most effective ways to help youth in foster care successfully transition to adulthood, make permanent and stable family connections, achieve economic success, and engage with their communities.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative provides technical assistance, tools, and funds to local organizations and systems to improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care – especially in the areas of permanent family connection, youth engagement, and economic success. Jim Casey Youth partners with public and private systems throughout the United States, and collaborates with funders such as the Eckerd Family, Richard M. Fairbanks, Lumina, Sherwood, William and Ruth Scott Family, Hawaii Community, and Geist Foundations, as well as public agencies.

Site-based demonstrations have led to increased collaboration among advocates, state agencies, and community-based providers. For example, in Iowa, a coalition of partners helped champion a youth-led effort to enact important legislation to improve opportunities and outcomes for older youth. Youth leadership boards were key partners with state leaders in a push that successfully passed the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) legislation. This legislation provides the opportunity for continued financial support to youth in foster care to age 21 and extends Medicaid eligibility automatically for these youth up to age 21. The legislation also provides an increase of over \$2.2 million in state resources that will directly benefit youth transitioning from foster care in Iowa.

Policy and practice changes will occur when the core strategies are applied in planned demonstrations. For example, the Connected by 25 site in Tampa, supported by the Eckerd Family Foundation and Jim Casey Youth, concluded that the family court was an underutilized but critically important partner that was ideally positioned to ensure quality assurance and effective decision making in child welfare cases since so many private providers are involved in the system. The initiative invested time, energy, and resources into developing a working partnership with the local courts. This advocacy contributed to the creation of an Independent Living Court (IL Court), a specialized division of the Unified Family Court. The IL Court has been the mechanism for establishing guidelines and expectations about practice and systems performance and for maintaining quality assurance and measuring outcomes. The IL Court has stringent guidelines about planning and supporting documentation that must be presented to ensure youth indicators of well-being are adequately addressed, that transition plans are sound and viable, and that the young person before the court has been engaged and supported in providing input throughout the process. Young people are empowered to speak out in the IL Court, and hearings are designed to accommodate active youth participation. The initiative partnership with the IL Court involves collaboration in developing and delivering training; in creating checklists for hearings and templates for orders; and in measuring and tracking performance of the court and broader system partners.

Through its Opportunity Passport™ (matched savings accounts), Jim Casey Youth has demonstrated that this population can save and amass age-appropriate assets, and advocate for systems improvements. As of October 2008, 3,052 young people have saved a total of \$3,108,407; 1,077 of them have purchased 2,023 assets, most often cars and deposits on apartments. The most successful asset purchasers have been those young people who report facing additional challenges, such as being a young parent, experiencing homelessness, or having no adult in their lives to turn to for support.

### ***The Stoneleigh Center***

The Stoneleigh Center is a Philadelphia-based organization that offers fellowship awards to support outstanding individuals whose work can unite research, policy, and practice regarding issues of child welfare, education, and juvenile justice. With an ideal outcome of policy change, the Stoneleigh Center provides the necessary funding and support for professionals to develop innovative solutions that affect the well-being of vulnerable youth over the long term and for ensuing generations. Their efforts have helped to shape and define relationships between education providers, policymakers, and members of the community.

One such fellowship program is the Pennsylvania Academic and Career/Technical Training (PACTT) program, which has allowed for improved academic services in residential facilities that house individuals currently in the juvenile justice system. Prior to the program's start, it was estimated that close to 90 percent of all Pittsburgh and Philadelphia youth did not finish school once they entered the juvenile justice program. At the same time, little to no technical training was offered, leaving youth with few choices upon re-integration into their homes and communities.

Although the two Pennsylvania cities faced similar obstacles in terms of the re-integration of youth, there was little to no collaboration between their systems. Little collaboration was also present between the systems serving the youth; the justice, education, mental health services, and child welfare agencies all worked independently of one another—and oftentimes with the belief that another service was taking charge of the challenges of educating and training the juvenile workforce.

PACTT stepped in to unify these programs and create a real solution for youth in juvenile justice centers. PACTT is unique in that instead of targeting the individual systems for improvement, it seeks to provide cross-services support and change.

Initially, PACTT focused their efforts on the largest nine residential facilities in Philadelphia with hopes that changes instilled there would “trickle down” to the smaller institutions. Collaboration between the juvenile justice system and the Department of Education has resulted in a larger emphasis on career and technical training that is integrated with academics. Youth are trained along industry-recognized competencies and state education requirements to balance the focus on school completion and practical career training. Today, the education being offered in the facilities is much more aligned with state standards and directed toward building entry-level employment skills.

Stoneleigh's efforts are not just concentrated on Pennsylvania, however. The foundation is one without geographic boundaries, and it has fellows working on both coasts to integrate successful disconnected youth projects.

In Brooklyn, Stoneleigh currently has a fellow working with the diversionary justice approach. In the State of New York, individuals aged 16 and over who have committed violent crimes are treated as adults. The program, Common Justice, seeks to provide an alternative to incarceration for young people aged 16 to 24. Instead of a heavy focus on incarceration, Common Justice reinforces the idea of “participatory justice,” in which healing, accountability, and recovery are at the core of the rehabilitation process. The focus is on connecting youth to community services in order to reduce recidivism rates and improve mental health outcomes for the disconnected youth.

As with all the programs underway at the Stoneleigh Center, both of these highlighted programs provide a research-based outcome for replication in other cities and states facing similar obstacles. This combined focus on research, policy, and practice means that changes are made with long-term outcomes in mind—especially since the program

operates so closely with public services. The Stoneleigh Center believes that enhancing the innovation and implementation of programs through foundations in this way is one of the best methods for assisting government programs that are often restricted as to what they are allowed to do and fund.

## THINKING AHEAD

Young people's life trajectories are deeply influenced by how they interact with the different public systems such as education, child welfare, and juvenile justice—as well as the state of the public systems where youth live. For example, when young individuals are unlucky enough to be in a low-performing high school, the likelihood of graduating falls to 50 percent or below. If drawn into the juvenile justice system as compared to child welfare, an entirely different set of services are offered. Personal challenges also play an integral role in youth development, and many existing support services are either unable or unwilling to take into account the factors that most deeply shape these individuals.

Further compounding the issue is the fact that young people of color often receive differential treatment at each step of the process in the juvenile justice system. Moreover, youth access to resources may be limited by outdated program rules and regulations, a lack of inter-program crossovers, and programs that rely on high turnover rather than data-based results.

The good news is that there are thousands of organizations (foundations, advocates, and practitioners) working on behalf of youth. Every year, more organizations realize the financial, social, and moral ramifications of a youth population whose basic educational, career, and transitional needs are not being met. Society must find a way to use these organizations and the resources they offer to meet the needs of one of our most important assets—today's youth.

The Youth Transition Funders Group hopes that the framework and recommendations set out in this issue brief will encourage even greater strategic grantmaking and leadership so that each and every one of our youth are supported in their transition to adulthood.

For additional information on the Connected by 25 framework and related grantmaking strategies, reach out to the Youth Transition Funders Group at [Connectedby25@ytfg.org](mailto:Connectedby25@ytfg.org).

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF YOUTH AT RISK OF DISCONNECTION

When determining approaches to engaging youth at risk of disconnection, it is important to remember that “vulnerable youth” comprise a heterogeneous group that will require multiple options and approaches to reach each individual effectively.

As the only system that touches almost all at-risk youth, schools have a unique opportunity to identify vulnerable youth and intervene early, before youth face multiple risk factors for disconnection. For those youth who find themselves involved with foster care and juvenile justice agencies, the risk of disconnection can be greatly affected by how their needs are met while in care and the efforts to ensure that their needs will be met after leaving these systems. Unfortunately, too often youth at risk who enter broken systems exit more at risk for long-term disconnection. That is why it is important to include the following guiding principles in all policy and programmatic responses to addressing the needs of youth at risk of disconnection.

**I** All public systems serving youth need to fully embrace youth development principles and understand that youth needs are the same, regardless of which, if any, public system is guiding individual growth. At the same time, programs and policies must recognize that developmental timelines are not uniform across individuals.

While there are numerous models of positive youth development, the key point is that there is a considerable research base that highlights the core competencies and assets that youth need for healthy development. For example, to make a successful transition to adulthood and to be connected by 25, youth need to develop physically, psychologically, socially, and cognitively. It is critical for policymakers to understand the need for these core competencies, as well as recognize that youth develop at different rates and on varied trajectories.

Specifically, the systems that serve youth must simply improve how they relate to and serve youth. Programs need to:

- > **Motivate youth, increase expectations, and foster hope.** Research suggests that one of the key barriers vulnerable youth face is a lack of hope for their future and their ability to alter their current path. Vulnerable youth often feel that they are not expected to do well, and experts have suggested that youth will live down to such low expectations.
- > **Empower, engage, and enlist youth.** Youth must be considered and feel that they are the primary actors in the process of changing their own lives. Ultimately, nobody can change the trajectory of struggling youth except the youth themselves. Truly empowering youth to be responsible for reshaping their own trajectories not only increases their motivation and sense of self worth, but it also increases the likelihood that the programs serving these youth will be successful in gaining their participation.
- > **Protect youth rights.** Even when policies are in place to meet their needs, youth may not receive supports due to inconsistent and/or inadequate implementation of policies. Youth need to understand their rights, and have outside advocates to ensure that their rights are honored and met.
- > **Reduce stigma.** At-risk youth face both internal and external stigma due to the labels placed on them (e.g., foster child, juvenile delinquent, teen parent, school dropout, etc.). Engaging at-risk youth requires efforts to address their self perception, and to offer them opportunities to obtain assistance in ways that are not stigmatizing.
- > **Improve the youth-serving workforce.** Individual programs to serve youth will only be as successful as the quality of the workers carrying out the mission. Often, persons who work with youth do not have the training, compensation, and supports to do so effectively—or to build a satisfying career in youth service. Recruiting, training, and retaining a qualified and dedicated youth-service workforce are critical to achieving positive outcomes for vulnerable youth.

## 2 Assessment of system performance should be data-driven and outcome focused, with particular attention to early indicators of future risk.

To achieve long-term success, systems (and the personnel in the systems) need to be held responsible for meeting the needs of vulnerable youth, and structures must be designed to ensure accountability. To achieve accountability, consensus is needed on which outcomes for youth should be tracked, what data is needed to assess these outcomes, and who will be responsible for collecting these data. Given what is already known about the disproportionate risk of key populations, programs must also seek out patterns of racial/ethnic/gender differences and address underlying issues. Policymakers need to assess how to hold systems accountable for youth outcomes, including how to respond when systems fail to achieve acceptable outcomes.

A key example of cross-systems accountability is the need to ensure that educational systems work effectively with child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Although children from these agencies may represent a small proportion of all the children in the system, educational agencies share in the public responsibility assumed when children are taken into custody.

## 3 Systems and policies for youth must provide multiple pathways to success in the twenty-first century economy, including high school completion and post-secondary education, training, and employment opportunities.

Probably the most basic and most visible indicator that a young person is disconnected is that he or she is not attending school and not going to work. No matter which vulnerable target population is being discussed, policies and programs must explicitly focus on how to address youth educational and career development needs. To accomplish this, organizations must no longer rely on the policy goals of the past century. Instead, it is necessary to upgrade expectations, to strive to “race to the top,” so that the most vulnerable young people are prepared to find a place in today’s economy.

To reduce the level of youth disconnection, particular attention must be paid to three issues in all youth policies:

- > **Adequate “On Ramps.”** The concept of multiple pathways explicitly demands that there is always another “on ramp” for young people who detour from a traditional path. Policies must recognize that some proportion of youth can and will follow alternative routes to connection. For example, many students will not follow linear models of four years in high school, four years in college, and then a smooth entrance into the workforce and economic independence. Adequate on ramps will require: increased availability of alternative schools so that students who fall off track to graduation, whether they are in or out of school, can complete their diplomas; expanded youth employment services from the current level of serving less than 5 percent of eligible youth; and transitional services in GED programs so that there are alternate pathways to college.
- > **Customized Services.** Some young people encounter larger challenges than others. For some, there may be burdens of poverty such as poor health, taking care of siblings, or the need to work. Others face the threat of violence in their communities or homes. Many receive differential treatment in public systems or the labor market because of the color of their skin. While vulnerable youth may face similar challenges, effectively responding to their needs requires that systems customize their approaches. For example, while many youth in foster care may share the experience of abuse or neglect, their reactions to this experience will differ considerably and the necessary supports will vary greatly. Similarly, education and employment systems, including higher education, need to be able to customize the types of supports and opportunities needed to help young people succeed.
- > **Mix of Schools and Programs Designed for Educational Needs.** For years, systems have been failing to address one of the underlying challenges for many young people: elementary school literacy levels, sometimes with significant gaps in foundational skills. The current policies create this scenario because of a mixture of limited funding levels and time for programming, emphasis on employment outcomes, and substantial scarcity of programming. Thus the GED, which is one of the core program elements for helping to reconnect youth, is unavailable to young people with less than eighth grade reading levels. Furthermore, district alternative education and the youth employment programs are designed to serve those young people who can meet the outcomes within one year. It is necessary to include new policies to re-engage young people who still have a long way to go until they meet today’s standards of college and career readiness.

#### 4 Transitional services should be considered critical elements of all public systems with clear outcomes and funding.

The transition to competent adulthood is one that is difficult even under the most ideal circumstances. When youth have detoured from the traditional path of a stable home, education, and work, the difficulties only increase. Therefore, services to help youth make the transition and get back on a successful path are critical. It is essential to anticipate that youth will struggle in making transitions and recognize that failure is simply part of the developmental process for all youth. It is particularly critical for vulnerable youth to have opportunities to practice the skills they will need to be connected long before they reach age 25.

District alternative education and the youth employment programs are designed to serve those young people who can meet the outcomes within one year. It is necessary to include new policies to re-engage young people who still have a long way to go until they meet today's standards of college and career readiness.

Overall, youth need a safe environment in which they can gain experience in being independent and still have the support and encouragement to try again if their experiences are not completely successful. Youth-serving programs must “first do no harm.” Unfortunately, policies and procedures developed to protect vulnerable youth may have the unintended consequence of sheltering them from getting the developmental experiences they need.

Given the fact that so many vulnerable youth are involved in multiple systems, cross-system collaboration is also essential in ensuring successful transitions. Cross-system collaboration must include building appropriate and effective bridges between youth and adult systems, especially since many youth are not served by adult systems that can assist them, are served by adult systems that do not account for the fact that they are youth, or simply fail to connect to adult systems when leaving youth systems.

#### 5 Reinforce connections in youth's lives with families, children, and community/faith organizations. Research has clearly demonstrated that sustained turbulence negatively affects child development. Most vulnerable youth have suffered, or are at high risk of suffering, from instability in their families, education, and communities. This instability often separates youth from the few persons and places with which they have positive associations. To help youth get back on track, it is essential to reduce their instability and maintain the connections that these youth already have.

At-risk youth are often wrongly assumed to be disconnected or unsupported by family members, or it is assumed that their families cannot provide a positive support system. Helping vulnerable youth build or rebuild connections to family members and engaging family members in assisting vulnerable youth are critical components of successful programs.

In recent years, a great deal of attention has been paid to the importance of mentors in the lives of youth. Youth need opportunities to develop positive and enduring relationships with a range of individuals, including mentors, peers, family members, and other adults. Programs can assist youth by providing them both the opportunity and the skills to develop positive relationships with others.

Community engagement is also essential for identifying and recruiting vulnerable youth, and engaging community partners that have ongoing contact with youth is critical. Community agencies can be an ongoing source of material and service support for youth, but they can also provide youth with a sense of stability and belonging. Community agencies can also serve as a critical foundation for youth involved in multiple systems.

## APPENDIX B

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### GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

**Chafee Act**—Also called the Foster Care Independence Act, the Act expanded provisions for Independent Living Programs for youth aging out of foster care. For additional information: <http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/indlivhr3443.htm>.

**Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)**—First passed in 1965 and formerly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act, this Act holds schools accountable for students' progress through clearly defined content and achievement standards. For additional information: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>

**Workforce Investment Act (WIA)**—First enacted in 1998, this Act provides the framework for a unique workforce preparation and employment system that meets the needs of both job seekers and those working to further their careers. For additional information: <http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/wia/act.cfm>

**Workforce Investment Act, Title I**—This part of WIA authorizes the new Workforce Investment System and provides for accountability standards under WIA. For additional information: <http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/wia/Runningtext2.htm>

**Workforce Investment Act, Title II**—For years 1999-2003, this part of the WIA reauthorized Adult Education and Literacy programs. For additional information: <http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/wia/Runningtext2.htm>

**Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, Public Law 110-351**—This Act increases federal support to states in an effort to permanently place children with relatives, adoptive parents, and to enhance aid to foster youth. For additional information: <http://www.nacac.org/policy/HR6893summary.html>

**Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act**—This Act provides the major source of funding from the federal government to improve the quality of juvenile detention and related services in states. For additional information: <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/issues/jjdp/factsheet.html>

**Independent Living Programs (ILP)**—Now titled the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, this Program provides funds to states to assist youth in making the transition from foster care to independent living. For additional information: <http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/indlivhr3443.htm>

**Medicaid**—A state-administered health program that is available to low-income individuals and families. For additional information: <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/MedicaidGenInfo/>

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)**—Known as the TANF Bureau since May of 2006, the Bureau provides assistance to needy families by granting federal funds to states, territories, and tribes to develop welfare programs and work opportunities. For more information: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/tanf/about.html>

**Title IV-B of the Social Security Act – Child and Family Services**—This part of the Grants to States for Aid and Services to Needy Families with Children and for Child-Welfare Services Title promotes state flexibility in developing and expanding child and family services programs. For additional information: [http://www.ssa.gov/OP\\_Home/ssact/title04/0400.htm](http://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title04/0400.htm)

**Title IV-E of the Social Security Act—Federal Payments for Foster Care and Adoption Assistance**—This Part of the Grants to states for Aid and Services to Needy Families with Children and for Child-Welfare Services Title enables each state to provide transitional living programs for children in foster care as well as adoption assistance for children with special needs. For additional information: [http://www.ssa.gov/OP\\_Home/ssact/title04/0400.htm](http://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title04/0400.htm)

**Title XX of the Social Security Act**—This Title increases state flexibility with regard to social service grants and encourages states to furnish services that reduce dependency and prevent neglect, providing for institutional care when appropriate, and more. For additional information: [http://www.ssa.gov/OP\\_Home/ssact/title20/2000.htm](http://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title20/2000.htm)