

Foster Care Work Group

Ensuring all youth transitioning from foster care are connected by 25

INVESTMENT MATTERS

Investing in Evidence-Based Approaches for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care

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With growing budget pressures, investing in programs that have been rigorously tested provides a greater level of confidence that they will produce good results, thus reducing the likelihood scarce resources are spent on approaches that aren't working.

In recent years, in light of the 2008 federal Fostering Connections legislation, many state leaders have expanded or are seeking to improve the types of supports they offer to young people transitioning from foster care. Yet, as leaders consider how best to improve and potentially expand supports, too little attention is paid to the research base regarding what works. Despite the efforts of committed leaders, too many public funds are invested in programs and practices for older youth in and transitioning out of foster care for which we have too little evidence. In many cases, leaders simply don't know if a program is yielding positive results for youth and young adults. In most states and localities, little funding is directed toward approaches that are proven to work.

Investments in supports and services with a strong base of evidence are particularly important in our current economic climate. With growing budget pressures, investing in programs that have been rigorously tested provides a greater level of confidence that they will produce good results, thus reducing the likelihood scarce resources are spent on approaches that aren't working.

The current federal administration has placed a high priority on allocating federal funds toward evidence-based programs and supporting the development of a more rigorous evidence base for promising approaches. Likewise, private funders, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, have prioritized investments in developing the research base and wide-scale adoption of evidence-based programs. These efforts build on the longstanding work of federal agencies, such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to test and disseminate evidence-based practice.

However, it is worth noting the large-scale adoption of evidence-based approaches for youth transitioning from foster care requires a large volume of rigorous research. As many researchers have noted, the base of solid empirical evidence on programs and practices for older youth in the child welfare system is still in an early stage. While some programs and practices, such as those in the mental health and drug prevention fields, have been heavily researched, in many other areas, little research has been conducted. This brief highlights considerations, challenges, and opportunities for foundations in investing in evidence-based approaches for youth transitioning out of foster care.

WHAT ARE EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES?

While there are not universally consistent definitions, within the “evidence-based” arena, a distinction is increasingly made between evidence-based programs, practices, and policies.

The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices defines evidence-based as “those approaches to prevention or treatment that are based in theory and have undergone scientific evaluation. ‘Evidence-based’ stands in contrast to approaches that are based on tradition, convention, belief, or anecdotal evidence.”

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- **Evidence-Based Programs** are specific interventions with well-articulated component strategies that have a clear theoretical foundation and have demonstrated positive effects on outcomes with targeted populations.¹ For example, Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is an evidence-based program that can support permanency for youth by providing intensive community-based supportive services to young people and their parents or other kin. The developers of evidence-based programs often develop detailed guidance for those wanting to implement the program and may require certification or licensing to ensure implementation with fidelity to the original model.
- **Evidence-Based Practices** are skills, techniques, or strategies employed by practitioners that research demonstrates have positive effects on outcomes with targeted populations.² Practices are the component parts of evidence-based programs and may be identified through research reviews that identify common practices across rigorously evaluated programs. For example, a Child Trends synthesis of findings from 31 rigorously evaluated interventions targeting youth transitioning to adulthood, found that multiple programs that included the practice of mentoring demonstrated positive school and employment outcomes.
- **Evidence-Based Policies** are federal, state, and local statutes, regulations, budget allocations, and administrative procedures that are developed based on a strong research base. Evidence-based policies can directly support the implementation of evidence-based programs or can mandate or incentivize behavior by individuals or organizations that a research base indicates will lead to good outcomes.³ For example, the Midwest Study, a longitudinal study examining outcomes for young people aging out of foster care has documented better outcomes for young people who stay in foster care beyond age 18 compared to those who exit at 18.⁴ While further studies are necessary, this landmark

study of youth transitioning provides a strong foundation of evidence regarding the federal and state policy of extending foster care to young people beyond the age of 18.

STANDARDS OF EVIDENCE

A critical starting point for moving toward greater investments in evidence-based approaches for youth transitioning is to have clear standards by which the strength of research and evaluations can be judged. A great deal of work has been done in recent years to develop standard of evidence for programs. Much less focus has been placed on clear standards for evidence-based practices and policies. While standards of evidence vary across researchers, databases, and funders, in general, the following level of rigor is used in defining evidence-based programs:⁵

Standards of Evidence	
<p>Evidence-based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Experimental evaluation (randomized controlled trials) demonstrating positive effects ■ Multiple quasi-experimental evaluations with strong comparison group and design demonstrating positive effects 	<p>Promising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Quasi-experimental evaluations demonstrating positive effects ■ Meta-analytic support demonstrating positive effects
<p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Evaluations that demonstrate mixed effects ■ Pre- and post-evaluations 	<p>Harmful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations demonstrating negative main effects or serious side effects

CHALLENGES

Funders seeking to increase the use of evidence-based programs for youth transitioning out of foster care face important challenges.

- **Limited supply of evidence-based programs.** A limited number of programs, practices, and policies exist that demonstrate consistent, significant, measurable evidence of success in improving outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care. In a review of what programs work for the general population of older youth (ages 18 to 25), Child Trends researchers found that education and career programs can be effective, especially for low-income youth and for youth targeted from younger ages, for example, those under age 18. Additionally, a few specific intervention strategies, such as mentoring, case management, and providing child care for young parents, are associated with program success across outcomes. However, the review found that existing substance use and reproductive health programs have not consistently been found to be effective across outcomes for this age group.⁶

Overall, surprisingly few programs for the older youth population in general have been rigorously evaluated. Significant gaps exist in programs that target sexual risk-taking and substance use outcomes. Little is known about what programs work best for youth and young adults who have had foster care experience, let alone what approaches work best for various subpopulations of youth in care—notably those young people who are pregnant or parenting.

- **Limited utilization of evidence-based programs.** The limited number of evidence-based programs and practices that do exist are not widely utilized—especially within public systems—and are available to very few of the youth who are eligible to receive them. While no data exists tracking how many young people within the foster care system participate in an evidence-based program or are supported with an evidence-based practice or policy, a recent study found that within the juvenile justice system, a system with a longer history of utilization of evidence-based approaches, less than 5 percent of high-risk juvenile offenders receive an evidence-based treatment.⁷

INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Foundations seeking to invest in evidence-based approaches for youth transitioning out of foster care have a range of options and opportunities.

1. Invest in strengthening the evidence that informs the development of more effective services for youth transitioning out of foster care. The early stage of development of the research base and the sheer magnitude of the research questions suggest a need for public and private funders, researchers, public policymakers and public administrators, practitioners, and young people to grapple with questions such as:

- What do we know about what works (and what doesn't work) and under what circumstances?
- What is the current evidence-base for commonly offered supports and service?
- What do we know (and don't know) about differences in the effectiveness of those programs and practices for different sub-populations?
- What research approaches are needed to fill the gaps in current knowledge?

Not only is there a need for more well-researched programs, based on rigorous evaluations, but also a need for much more knowledge about the leadership, policies, and practices among child welfare systems and their partners that enable the wide scale implementation of evidence-based programs with fidelity.

2. Invest in expanding the supply of evidence-based programs. Foundations can also invest in the design and adaptation of specific evidence-based programs for youth transitioning out of foster care. Specific goals might include:

- Investing in the development and adaptation of programs for older youth in foster care. Significant knowledge gaps exist in what works for older youth in general, such as for programs addressing reproductive health and substance abuse. We know even less about what works for older youth who have had foster care experience.
- Supporting promising programs in demonstrating a higher level of rigor for their efforts. This support could include assisting grantees in utilizing logic model tools, connecting them with local evaluators to design more rigorous evaluations of their work, and investing in independent evaluations of promising programs.
- Supporting grantees in testing current evidence-based programs within new communities and/or populations.

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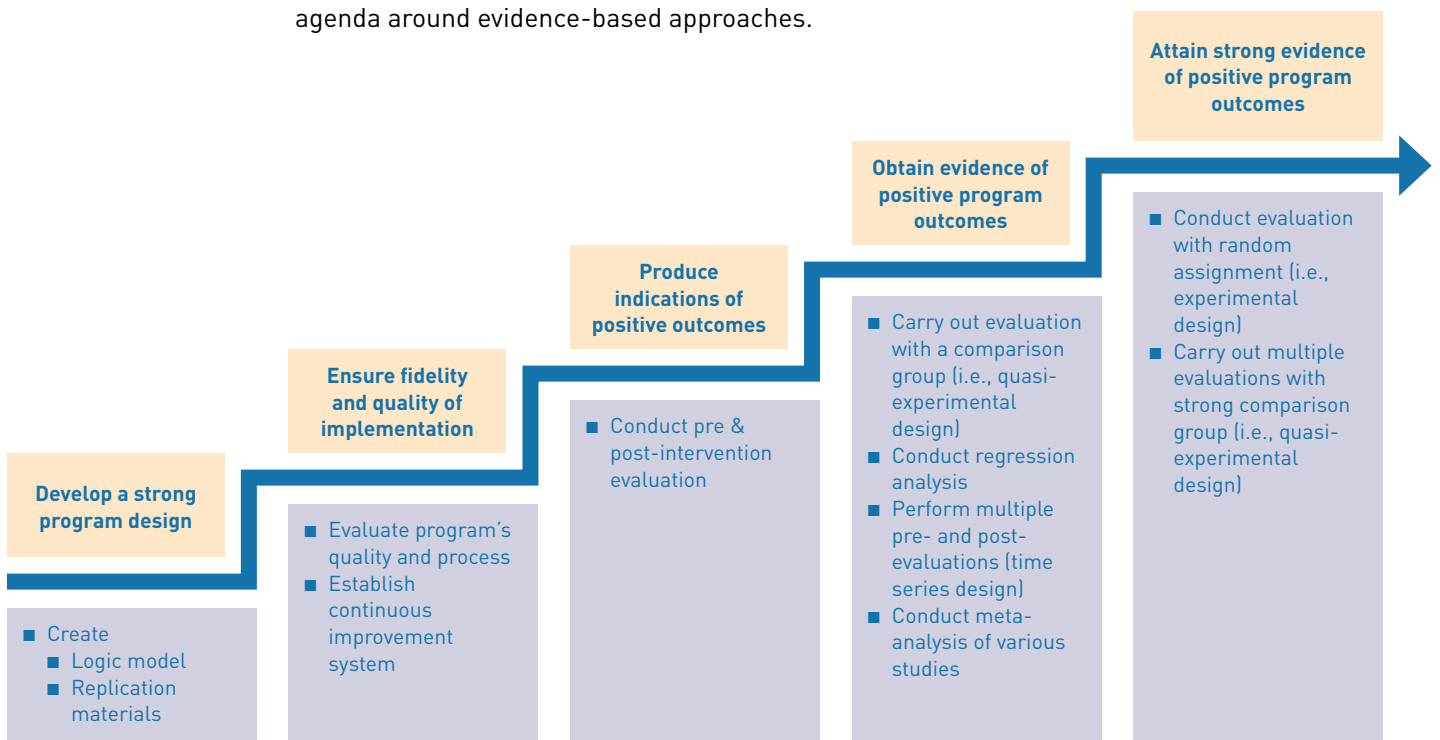
3. Invest in increasing the utilization of evidence-based programs, practices, and policies.

In addition to supporting new research into what works and helping to expand the supply of evidence-based programs, another important goal is investing in efforts to increase the utilization of evidence-based approaches for young people transitioning out of foster care. Increasing the utilization of evidence-based approaches by child welfare and other public agencies in particular is a critical strategy to achieve any level of scale. Investment opportunities to consider include:

- Investing in the creation of tools and resources to support utilization of evidence-based programs.
- Supporting grantees in selecting and utilizing evidence-based programs through training and technical assistance efforts.
- Investing in advocacy efforts to encourage systems to invest in evidence-based programs.
- Supporting public education and/or marketing campaigns to build understanding of and demand for evidence-based programs.

A USEFUL FRAMEWORK: Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Developmental Approach to Evidence-Based Programs

Recognizing the need to address both the supply and utilization gaps of evidence-based programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation created a developmental approach to investing in evidence-based programs. This approach meets grantees where they currently are and provides a clear path to move up the “stair step” of higher levels of evidence. It provides a helpful model for foundations seeking to develop an investment agenda around evidence-based approaches.



Selected Databases of Evidence-Based Program		
Database	Area of Focus	Website
Best Evidence Encyclopedia	Education programs	www.bestevidence.org
Blue Prints for Violence Prevention	Violence and drug prevention programs	www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/index.html
California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare	Child welfare-related programs	www.cebc4cw.org
Find Youth Info	Programs to prevent and/or reduce delinquency or other problem behaviors in young people	www.findyouthinfo.org
SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices	Mental health promotion, substance abuse prevention, and mental health and substance abuse treatment programs	http://nrepp.samhsa.gov
LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully)	Out-of-school time programs that enhance children's development	www.childtrends.org/Links/
The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Model Programs Guide	Youth programs including those focused on including substance abuse prevention, mental health, and education	www.ojjdp.gov/mpg
U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse	Education programs	http://ies.ed.gov

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¹ Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M. & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231).

² Ibid

³ Dickerson, M., Haggerty, K. P., & Catalano, R. F. (September 2011). The Use of Evidence-Based Policy for State and Local Decisionmakers. Seattle, Washington: Social Development Research Group [Issue Paper].

⁴ Courtney, M. E. et al. (2010). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall.

⁵ Sources: Blueprints for Violence Prevention, Best Evidence Encyclopedia, Working Group—Federal Collaboration of What Works

⁶ Hadley, A. M. Hadley, Mbwana, K., and Hair, E. C. (March 2010). Fact Sheet. What Works for Older Youth During the Transition to Adulthood: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

⁷ Henggeler, Scott W. and Sonja K. Schoenwald. 2011. "Evidence-based interventions for juvenile offenders and juvenile justice policies that support them." SRCD Social Policy Report 25(1): 3-20.



ABOUT THE YOUTH TRANSITIONS FUNDERS GROUP

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) is a network of grantmakers dedicated to improving the lives of young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who have few supports—such as teens aging out of the foster care system, youth who don't finish high school, or youth in the juvenile justice system. Through collaboration and strategic alliances, YTFG works to ensure that every young adult has the education, skills, and supports to be truly Connected by 25.



ABOUT THE FOSTER CARE WORK GROUP

The Foster Care Work Group (FCWG) is one of three work groups of YTFG. The FCWG is a network of funders who work together to support the economic success and well being of youth transitioning from foster care. FCWG members coordinate and leverage investments to ensure that all youth have lifelong family, personal, and community connections and the opportunities and tools to succeed throughout adulthood.



ABOUT MAINSPRING CONSULTING

Mainspring Consulting provides staff support to the FCWG. Mainspring works with foundation officers, policymakers, and state and community leaders to design effective programs and initiatives for children, families and communities, develop sound strategies to leverage resources, and to create effective plans to move from good thinking to action.