

A Plan for Investing in the Social,  
Emotional and Physical Well-Being  
of Older Youth in Foster Care

# Connected by 25



## Executive Summary



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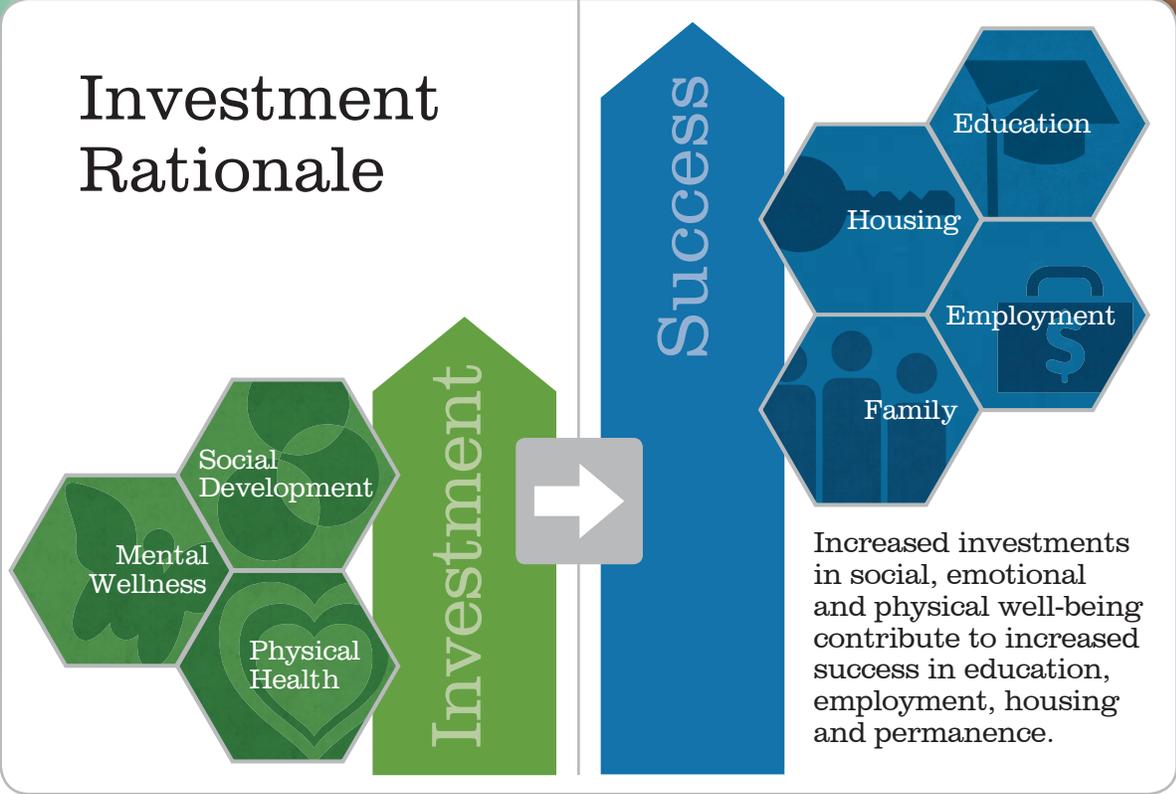
**Positive social, emotional, and physical well-being are core aspects of a young person's development.** To be healthy and well, young people need to be able to successfully interact within their community, develop and maintain relationships, understand and express emotions in an effective way, and be able to make healthy life choices.

All young people require attention to and care for their social, emotional, and physical well-being. However, older youth currently in or transitioning from foster care often experience lower levels of social, emotional, and physical well-being than their peers. These social and emotional challenges affect young people's abilities to develop cognitive skills and also make it difficult for them to develop a strong sense of self, regulate emotions, manage stress, make decisions and plan for the future. These challenges can also impede young people's abilities to interact with others, to negotiate social situations, and to form and sustain healthy relationships.

**Older youth experiencing and transitioning from foster care who are not able to safely and effectively manage these social and emotional challenges face significant hurdles throughout their transition to adulthood.** Without the capacity to effectively deal with a mental health challenge, it can be incredibly difficult to form and sustain the relationships that create the foundation for lifelong permanence or fully participate in educational opportunities. Without healthy coping skills, it can be hard to deal with challenges in a school environment, with a roommate, or in a workplace. Without strong social networks, it can be difficult to succeed in school, find a place to live, and find and keep a job.

**Well-being remains a critical gap in the field of child welfare and is an issue of particular importance for older youth currently in and transitioning from foster care.** Child welfare systems have not typically viewed assuring well-being as their responsibility. With the important exception of a few recent new federal discretionary grants, relatively little current public or private investment is directed toward social, emotional, and physical well-being.

No young person should age out of the foster care system without a permanent relationship with a caring adult. Investments that support the social, emotional, and physical well-being of young people entering and transitioning from foster care will increase the odds that they will both achieve and sustain these permanent relationships. Investments in social, emotional and physical well-being will also improve related outcomes of educational and employment success, and ultimately reduce the number of young people who age out of foster care each year.



This investment agenda seeks to bring focus to the critical issue of social, emotional, and physical well-being by leveraging and advancing new and emerging interest within and outside the federal government and research and advocacy communities to better understand and support social, emotional, and physical well-being for older youth in foster care. The Youth Transition Funders Group’s Foster Care Work Group (FCWG) encourages public and private funders to invest in a coordinated series of funding strategies—as individual funders and working together in funder collaboratives—to improve the social, emotional, and physical well-being of youth transitioning from foster care.

### A Framework For Well-Being

The FCWG developed a framework for well-being for youth transitioning from foster care that encompasses three broad areas: (1) social, emotional, and physical well-being; (2) safety and permanency; and (3) economic success. All three of these areas are undergirded and strengthened within a strong community context. Attention to each domain is necessary for youth to effectively make the transition to adulthood. This document recommends investment strategies focused on social, emotional, and physical well-being.

# Framework for Well-Being for Older Youth in Foster Care

All young people should have the opportunity and support...



Focus of Investment Agenda: Social, Emotional, and Physical Well-Being					
<p><b>... to maximize their intellectual ability and functioning</b></p> <p>Are exposed to stimulating learning environments</p> <p>Have the opportunity to participate in activities that spark their interests</p> <p>Have appropriate critical-thinking, problem-solving, planning, and decision-making skills</p> <p>Are able to set and commit to realistic and productive goals</p>	<p><b>... to cultivate a strong and resilient self-identity and nurturing relationships and to feel hopeful about life and the future.</b></p> <p>Have a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem</p> <p>Have a positive experience of living in, connecting with, and belonging to a family</p> <p>Have the capacity to make good decisions about and engage in physically and emotionally healthy relationships</p> <p>Cultivate healthy and supportive social networks that help them achieve their goals</p> <p>Are able to communicate effectively</p> <p>Are able to use healthy coping skills</p> <p>Are able to self-manage and regulate emotions</p> <p>Are able to engage in positive social behavior</p> <p>Have support for their spiritual journeys</p>	<p><b>... to manage their mental health and wellness</b></p> <p>Are able to manage mental distress in a healthy way</p> <p>Are able to access resources to manage mental health diagnoses in a healthy way</p> <p>Are full participants in treatment decisions</p> <p>Have health insurance for mental health</p> <p>Have access to mental health services to meet needs, including access to non-pharmaceutical treatments</p> <p>Are provided trauma-specific education</p>	<p><b>... to maximize physical health, strength, and functioning</b></p> <p>Have access to a spectrum of healthy activities that reflect their interests and capabilities</p> <p>Have access to information to make informed health-related decisions</p> <p>Engage in healthy behaviors</p> <p>Have health insurance for physical health</p> <p>Have access to health services to effectively meet needs</p> <p>Have information about and access to reproductive health</p> <p>Have a connection to a primary care physician and a medical home</p> <p>Are able to and have support for living with a physical challenge or limitation</p>	<p><b>SAFETY</b></p> <p><b>...to ensure they are physically and psychologically safe and free from abuse and neglect</b></p> <p>Have tools to cope when they feel unsafe</p> <p>Make informed choices related to risky behavior</p> <p>Take reasonable precautions to avoid becoming victims of crime and/or violence</p> <p><b>PERMANENCY</b></p> <p><b>... to belong to a family for a lifetime</b></p> <p>Have at least one adult to rely on for a lifetime</p> <p>Feel connected and a sense of belonging to a supportive family network</p> <p>Have a sense of belonging to their culture and community</p>	<p><b>EDUCATION</b></p> <p><b>... to achieve educational success to their fullest potential, including secondary and post-secondary completion</b></p> <p>Access to education that matches interests and abilities, ignites passions, and inspires lifelong learning</p> <p>Acquire education and training that enable them to attain marketable skills that can lead to steady employment</p> <p><b>EMPLOYMENT</b></p> <p><b>... to obtain and retain steady employment that provides both a living wage and a career path</b></p> <p>Gain work experience that matches interests and abilities and contributes to their needs</p> <p><b>HOUSING</b></p> <p><b>... to obtain safe, stable, and affordable housing</b></p>

## Community Context

Young people are supported by communities that:

- Cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive environments
- Seek to grow resilient local economies
- Cultivate opportunities that are culturally rich and vibrant
- Support healthy parenting and caregivers
- Cultivate opportunities for civic engagement

# Investment Strategies to Support the Well-Being of Youth Transitioning from Foster Care

The FCWG recommends five sets of priority investment strategies intended to improve the social, emotional, and physical well-being outcomes for youth ages 14 to 25 experiencing and transitioning from foster care. Meaningful youth engagement should remain a centerpiece of all investment strategies presented below.

## 1. Invest in Improving, Expanding, and Sustaining Innovative and Evidence-Informed Practice

- Support the development, training, and use of **evidence-based functional assessment tools**.
- **Enhance the focus on well-being within existing practice models** while also creatively designing and testing innovative new models of case management, supervision, and administration.
- Support child welfare practitioners in navigating complex federal and state policies that affect **children of immigrants** in the foster care system.
- Support efforts to develop, test, implement, scale, and sustain approaches to support the well-being of **other specific vulnerable populations**, including LGBTQ youth; youth of Native American heritage; those involved with the juvenile justice system; young people with disabilities (cognitive, mental health, physical and/or medical); and those who are pregnant or parenting.
- Support enhanced and ongoing **professional development** of those working with older youth and young adults.

## 2. Invest in Policy and Advocacy

- Develop policies **requiring the most “family-like” and least restrictive placement** possible for young people under age 18, that reduce use of APPLA (“another planned permanent living arrangement”), and that end the option of allowing young people to age out of a group setting.
- **Support planning efforts to design supports and services beyond 18**, state legislative efforts to extend Title IV-E eligibility, as well as training and capacity-building efforts to prepare state and local partners for implementation.
- Develop policies that ensure **transition planning takes into account developing social and emotional skills** and ensures access to resources that support social, emotional, and physical health.
- Develop policies and practices to ensure **access to continuous and portable Medicaid coverage to age 26** under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as well as increase the health care provider community’s knowledge of and support for young people transitioning from foster care.
- Ensure access to other physical and mental health services by **broadening the definition of “medical necessity” for those who have experienced trauma and establish minimum benefit levels under Medicaid** to ensure adequate coverage for physical and mental health services.

### 3. Invest in Community Supports and Opportunities

- **Ensure access to opportunities for young people to build passions and participate in healthy social networks** by removing child welfare system barriers and supporting the “Prudent Parent Standard.”
- **Ensure access to community opportunities for healthy activities** by modifying eligibility standards if needed, offering participation scholarships, and providing needed equipment and supplies.
- **Provide community engagement and service opportunities** by linking young people to community organizations offering service, volunteer, and leadership development activities and providing training, skills, and capacity-building among community agencies as they recruit and support young people with foster care experience.
- **Support foster parents and caseworkers in becoming aware of opportunities in the community and actively support the pursuit of those opportunities.** Provide information about available activities and incentivize care givers to proactively get young people in their care involved with at least one extracurricular or community-based activity in which they are interested.
- Provide assistance for foster parents and caseworkers to **support the spirituality of young people**, including providing access and transportation to religious services of their choosing and opportunities to celebrate specific rites of passage.

### 4. Cross-Systems Investments

- **Ensure well-being issues for transitioning youth are included in broader youth initiatives.** Work to ensure that youth who have foster care experience are included in the planning and development of these initiatives and that well-being issues are a focus within these broader youth efforts.
- **Support leadership, planning structures, and data systems** at the state and local level to ensure that good intentions and innovative ideas blossom into sustainable vehicles for producing good results.
- **Develop strategic partnerships with specific youth-serving systems**
  - **Dependency, Juvenile, and Family Courts:** provide training for judicial personnel on how to include inquiries about social, emotional, and physical well-being during hearings and ensure youth have effective, well-trained representation in court.
  - **Education and Workforce Systems:** support school stability for youth in care at all levels; increase awareness of the unique needs of youth in foster care among providers of education and job-training programs; and provide coaching, mentoring, and related supports for young adults in post-secondary programs and career-development programs.
  - **Health Care Systems:** ensure that all young people have access to a medical home, all young people are enrolled in and are accessing services through Medicaid; and increase the health care provider community’s knowledge of and support for young people transitioning from foster care.
  - **Mental Health, Behavioral Health, and Wellness Providers:** build the capacity of mental health providers to offer developmentally appropriate services; expand the array of mental health and wellness offerings, including trauma-informed services; and reduce the reliance on pharmaceutical treatments and ensure that, when needed, they are appropriately prescribed and monitored.

- **Housing and Transportation Systems:** support partnerships between the child welfare system and the housing and transportation systems to help bridge the gaps in the current service system for youth and young adults.

## 5. Invest in Research and Evaluation

- **Expand capacity to measure well-being** by operationalizing results and indicators into measurable constructs and designing effective data-collection tools and strategies.
- **Clarify what we need to know more about.** Priority research areas include: assessing the longer-term effects of psychotropic medication on brain health, exploring what types of therapies work best for older youth, assessing characteristics and attributes of placement settings and care givers that work well with older youth and young adults, exploring circumstances that create the “later front door” (entries of young adolescents into care), and further inquiry into understanding the implications of trauma and extending research into practice.
- **Design new interventions that focus on social, emotional, and physical well-being,** including cognitive interventions and other interventions that support relational and emotional wellness.
- **Expand the evidence base of promising programs** by supporting rigorous evaluation design, the take-up of both new and existing programs and interventions with demonstrated effectiveness, and the de-scaling of programs that do not work.

## Conclusion

This agenda calls for a new and focused series of investments by public and private funders that seek to ensure young people transitioning from foster care are healthy in mind, body, and spirit. Through coordinated investments in improving, expanding, and sustaining practice; policy and advocacy; community supports and opportunities; cross-systems investments; and research and evaluation, funders can improve social, emotional and physical well-being outcomes for older youth experiencing and transitioning from foster care. And by doing so, these investments can also contribute to improvements in interrelated outcomes of permanency and economic success as well.



## THE YOUTH TRANSITION FUNDERS GROUP

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) was formed in 2001 by funders dedicated to improving the lives of our nation's most vulnerable young people. Foundations involved in YTFG are committed to achieving a common mission—ensuring that this nation's young people are successfully connected by age 25 to institutions and support systems that will enable them to succeed throughout adulthood. YTFG has adopted the theme, "Connected by 25," to describe this mission. A young person who is Connected by 25 has attained five critical outcomes: educational achievement in preparation for career and community participation, including a high school diploma, postsecondary 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; and the capacity to participate in the civic life of one's community. To achieve this mission, YTFG members are committed to working together, thereby enhancing the likelihood that investments from individual foundations will make a real difference in promoting young people's attainment of these outcomes. For more information about YTFG, visit [www.ytfg.org](http://www.ytfg.org).

## THE FOSTER CARE WORK GROUP

The Foster Care Work Group (FCWG) is one of three work groups of YTFG. FCWG members work to ensure that all youth in foster care have lifelong family, personal, and community connections and the opportunities and tools to achieve economic success and well being. FCWG members seek to coordinate and leverage investments that: help to build the capacity of communities to effectively support young people transitioning from foster care; strengthen federal and state policies for youth leaving care; and raise public awareness of the needs of youth currently in or transitioning from foster care. Together, members of the FCWG work to build a national movement of funders, community leaders, young people, policymakers, practitioners and researchers with a shared focus on supporting successful futures for youth who have experienced foster care.

## MAINSRING CONSULTING

The FCWG is staffed by Mainspring Consulting, a firm that works with foundation officers, policymakers, and state and community leaders to design effective programs and initiatives for children, youth and families, develop sound strategies to leverage resources, and to create effective plans to move from good thinking to action.



[www.fostercareworkgroup.org](http://www.fostercareworkgroup.org)



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