



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
330 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

November 18, 2020

Dear Child Welfare Leaders:

In recent months, the Children's Bureau (CB) has held twelve roundtable discussions with youth who are or were in foster care (Young Leaders) from across the country. Many of you and/or your staff were instrumental in arranging for their participation in the discussions, and I want to express my appreciation for those efforts.

During each of the calls, Young Leaders highlighted struggles and successes that they or their peers are experiencing. As you may expect, most conversations highlighted needs and concerns arising from the current pandemic and its effects on the well-being of our youth. We heard some affirming accounts of child welfare staff and providers going above and beyond to help youth remain connected and in receipt of critical services. We also heard of ongoing challenges that youth face.

The purpose of this letter is to summarize some of the major themes that emerged from the calls and to ask for your ongoing support of our youth.

Among the affirming themes were the following:

- Many Young Leaders expressed the importance of staying connected with caseworkers/independent living coordinators and reported examples of how caseworkers/independent living coordinators had proactively reached out to ask youth if they were okay and what they might need and stayed in regular contact;
- Other Young Leaders reported that caseworkers/independent living coordinators had helped ensure that they had access to cell phones and the internet to maintain connections with family, friends, and other critical supports; and
- Young Leaders also reported systems-level support that had been provided by child welfare agencies, such as changing policy to prevent young people from aging out during the pandemic and efforts to work with colleges and universities to ensure young people could remain in dormitory living.

Among the ongoing challenges they face are the following:

- *Social isolation* brought on by the pandemic was a common theme, with the youth expressing desires for more interaction with others and a need for activities that would help to ease the isolation. They routinely identified the importance of remaining connected to their social workers, therapists, and other supports virtually. We urge agencies to help ensure the consistency and quality of ongoing caseworker/independent living coordinator contact with youth, along with contact with other important connections, including relatives.

- *Mental health and overall well-being* surfaced as a common theme and was often tied to social isolation. Young Leaders routinely identified the benefit of youth being able to receive mental health services and therapy virtually during the pandemic; however, a number of Young Leaders noted limitations on youth being able to take full advantage of the therapy and contacts due to the lack of privacy within their placement settings. Young Leaders also conveyed that youth reported feeling uncomfortable discussing very personal matters when others in their homes or facilities could hear the discussions. We encourage all state child welfare agencies to help ensure that youth have access to both the technology for continued mental health services and the privacy to benefit fully from the services that are in place.

Young Leaders routinely indicated that youth are experiencing feelings of loneliness and disconnection from others that led them or their peers to have increased thoughts about suicidal ideation. We heard this at greater length during our roundtable with tribal youth.

We urge state child welfare leaders to reach out to tribes and tribal consortia located within their states to determine resources the state may be able to offer to provide support and resources to help maintain the health and well-being of tribal youth.

- *Concerns about aging out of foster care during the pandemic without a place to go or means to support themselves* was a theme of the discussions. Many youth appreciated agencies reaching out to them earlier in the pandemic to see if they were well and needed assistance. As the pandemic continues, and youth grapple with the other challenges highlighted in this letter, we strongly urge all child welfare leaders to thoughtfully consider all ways to continue supporting this population of young people, including, but not limited to, temporarily extending care or suspending timelines that typically require exit from foster care or accompanying supports.

We remind states that CB has offered flexibilities under the Stafford Act for certain title IV-E requirements. These include flexibility in meeting the education and employment eligibility conditions for youth in extended title IV-E foster care and, for states that had not previously been approved to offer title IV-E foster care, adoption assistance, and guardianship assistance to eligible youth ages 18 – 21, the ability to exercise the option through a simplified process. In addition, states that offer foster care to youth up to age 21 (either through the federal title IV-E program or a state-run program) may opt to serve youth up to age 23 under the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. For additional information on these options, please contact your Regional Office.

- *Job loss and/or difficulty finding meaningful employment*, and the ensuing financial repercussions were cited as common challenges facing the youth.
- *Safe and secure housing*, especially for youth who relied on their college dormitories as their main source of housing, was identified as a need. While some youth indicated their colleges/universities were willing to work with them to remain on campus, others discussed disruptions in their housing circumstances. As you have done in the past during the pandemic, we urge foster care agencies to conduct regular check-ins with the youth to ensure that they are properly housed.

- *Worries about schools and universities shifting to a virtual learning environment* was a theme of the roundtable discussions, due, in part, to concerns about access to technology necessary to learn in a virtual setting, and also about continuing social isolation issues.
- *Access to healthcare* especially for young people who may have special medical needs or have been ill with the coronavirus.
- *Reduced access to reliable transportation* has been a concern for many youth due to shutdowns in public transportation or fears of contracting the virus.
- *Reunification and adoption finalizations were raised as concerns*, given challenges with the normal operations of the courts. We have urged and will continue to urge courts to maintain essential operations, virtually if necessary, in order not to delay permanency achievement for youth in foster care. We encourage agencies to work collaboratively with the courts to ensure that these procedures continue.

This is, by no means, an exhaustive list of the issues raised by Young Leaders, but were those we wanted to call attention to in particular. We want to again share our sincere gratitude for assisting us in setting up these discussions and your diligence in helping meet these critical needs. Should you have further comments or questions, please feel free to reach out.

Sincerely,



Jerry Milner
Associate Commissioner
Children's Bureau

Resources

Letter from the Children's Bureau Regarding the Use of Federal Funds for Cell Phones and Personal Protective Equipment

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/letter-federal-funds>

New Child Welfare Information Gateway Resource on Virtual Practice:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/workforce/virtualpractice/>

Letter from the Children's Bureau Regarding Caseworker Reviews, Title IV-E Eligibility Reviews, Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations, CFSR PIPs, and Other Regulatory Flexibilities

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/new_guidance_videoconferencing.pdf

Letter from the Children's Bureau Regarding Fingerprint-based Criminal Record Check Requirements and Monthly Caseworker Visits

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/stafford_act.pdf

Stafford Act Flexibility for Certain Title IV-E Requirements Program Instruction, [ACYF-CB-PI-20-10](#)