

Foster Care 18-21

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The Foster Care 18-21 policy is an extended foster care program implemented by North Carolina on January 1, 2017. The policy sets out to serve as a bridge for youth who aged out of foster care by promoting independence and autonomy while also providing resources and support for youth when they need it. For a young adult to be eligible to participate in the Foster Care 18-21 policy, they must have been in foster care at age 18, meaning that they were not adopted or reunified with their biological family before the age of 18. They must also meet additional requirements such as either pursuing a high school diploma or its equivalent, making plans to enroll in a postsecondary institution or some form of vocational training, or working at least 80 hours a month. However, if the young adult possesses some sort of physical or mental disability which may hinder them from fulfilling any of the aforementioned requirements, they may be exempt from meeting the criteria and are still eligible for benefits.

Youth who are in the foster care system begin completing Transitional Living Plans (TLPs) at the age of 14 to prepare them for adulthood. These plans may include future living arrangements, scholastic and/or personal goals that the youth and social worker decide upon together. At least three months before the youth turns 18 years old, they finalize their TLP and are given the option to participate in Foster Care 18-21. The program is purely voluntary, and youth who decide not to join at age 18 may re-enter at any point before their 21st birthday if they so choose. Also, youth who participate in the program may choose to terminate services at any time for any reason. If a youth is willing to participate, the TLP is updated to ensure that the youth is meeting the criteria to be eligible upon their 18th birthday.

In addition to completing educational/vocational requirements and/or being employed for at least 80 hours a month, young adults in Foster Care 18-21 must complete a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) in order to receive their monthly stipend. The VPA must be

approved by the court to ensure that the living environment is safe and hazard free and that the young adult is not living in the home of the removal parent. Examples of appropriate placements include college dormitories, apartments, a shared living arrangement and living with extended family or a family friend.

History

North Carolina's interpretation of an extended foster care policy is not the first instance in the U.S. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 25 states and the District of Columbia have implemented some form of an extended foster care program. The need for youth in foster care to continue to receive services resulted in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, meant to, as its name suggests, support foster care youth beyond the age of 18 so that they may be more successful. In the original act, states have the option of providing extended services up to the age of 21 if they are meeting the same criteria that North Carolina requires of their youth.

At a national level, research and statistics showed that youth who had been in foster care and aged out at 18 had a higher likelihood of succumbing to homelessness, teenage pregnancy and criminal activity than youth who were not in foster care (Baluyot, 2017). Additionally, foster care youth who age out have a more difficult time obtaining adequate health care, employment and emotional support and are more likely to fall into the cycle of unstable and unhealthy living conditions if they are not given support from trustworthy individuals (Extending, 2017). The purpose of the Fostering Connections Act is to help reduce the risks that arise from aging out of the system and bridging the gap between adolescence and adulthood. From a developmental standpoint, there are few youths that are 100% capable of providing for themselves and making adult decisions at age 18. For those who come from a stable home environment, a vast majority have the convenience of reliable friends and family members to count on when they are in a rut

and need guidance and direction. Many foster care youths do not have many individuals that they can trust or feel comfortable enough to reach out to when they need help. This policy is designed to aid in solving that problem.

Each state that is currently participating in an extended foster care program does so differently and reaches out to youth anywhere between 18 to 21 years old.

Significance of Foster Care 18-21

In the time that I have spent working directly with foster care youth at Under One Sky Village Foundation, I have come to the realization that many services that are available to the general public are more difficult for this population to receive. For instance, I have met youth whose biological parents have abused their Social Security numbers, resulting in rejection from agencies who run their credit and prevents them from being able to rent an apartment or take out a loan. In addition, due to the fact that many foster care youths who have been moved into countless placements in a short amount of time may not have established a healthy relationship with a reliable adult that can provide support and guidance to the youth as they begin planning their lives once they turn 18. At a conference I attended in Charlotte, NC that discussed how to support foster youth in pursuing post-secondary educational opportunities, I learned that youth who age out of foster care are at a higher risk of criminal activity, homelessness and teenage pregnancy. In fact, in a study conducted by the Midwest Study regarding homelessness during the transition from foster care to adulthood, between 31% and 46% of study participants had been homeless at least once by the age of 26 (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013). I believe that North Carolina's implementation of this extended foster care program is crucial in thwarting these risk factors and increase success among a population that is often overlooked.

In a presentation regarding Foster Care 18-21 by Erin Baluyot, Social Services Coordinator of the Division of Social Services, Child Welfare Section at the North Carolina

Department of Health and Human Services, the purpose of the policy is meant to “provide resources to youth transitioning into adulthood, cater to their developmental needs, and grant them freedom to be independent” (Baluyot, 2017). There are currently programs such as LINKS in place for older teens to have access to resources from the state for needs from purchasing a car to paying for equipment to participate in extracurricular activities. However, the need for an extended program with emphasis on an established support team and a monthly stipend to help cover living expenses elevates the quality of care that foster care youth deserve.

Values

Based on the six primary values expressed in the Code of Ethics, it is safe to say that the Foster Care 18-21 policy emphasizes a great deal of them in providing extended services to North Carolina foster care youth. Many programs targeted to provide resources to a particular population intend to be of some kind of service, helping a group of people who need assistance and doing so without incentive. Additionally, the central purpose of the policy is to confront the social injustice that stems from the disadvantages placed among youths who have aged out of foster care. It is unfair that this population must work harder to obtain the same opportunities as other young adults, and offering an established policy that lobbies for safe housing, educational and vocational advancement.

The young adults that have the opportunity to participate in Foster Care 18-21 are encouraged to take the lead in making decisions for their lives with the help of a transition support team. Also, the young adult has the choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in the program; it is not mandatory. Giving them the freedom to become independent adults and refraining from making decisions for the individual is a prime example of respecting “the inherent dignity and worth of the person” (Workers, 2017). The goal in this policy is to understand that the young adult is the expert of their own experiences and that is exactly what it

sets out to do by giving them control over what is included in their transitional living plans, where they want to live (provided it is approved by the court) and who is allowed to attend their transition support team meetings. It is important that these young adults are able to speak up for themselves and have a say in what goes on in their lives so that they are adequately prepared for transitioning out of the program.

Research/Practice Connections

According to an article by the National Conference of State Legislatures regarding extending foster care beyond age 18, “approximately 26,000 youth who ‘age out’ of foster care at age 18 each year face significant challenges in meeting their needs for health care, education, employment, housing and emotional support” (Extending, 2017). It goes on to say that a growing number of states permit youth the option to continue to receive support through the foster care system after age 18. In a study by the Chapin Hall Center for Children in 2009, 19-year-old youth in Illinois who opted to remain in foster care overcame challenges more than 19-year-old former foster youth in Iowa and Wisconsin, who did not offer an extended foster care program, “receiving more independent living services, progressing further in their education, having more access to health and mental health services, and experiencing less economic hardship and involvement in the criminal justice system” than Illinois foster youth who declined care (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack 2009).

The Fostering Connections Act that was signed in 2008 addressed the need for additional assistance for foster youth and allowed states the option of receiving Title IV-E reimbursement for the cost of providing foster care to young adults up to the age of 21. North Carolina interpreted the act and created Foster Care 18-21 with the unique addition of the Voluntary Placement Agreement in ensure safe and inhabitable living of their foster youth. As a result,

youth have made the decision to participate in the program, but there is a vast majority of youth who have not.

Effectiveness

While Foster Care 18-21 has good intentions and is a great way to bridge the gap between adolescence and adulthood, it has its flaws. For instance, only 321 youth opted into the program as of July 1, 2017 (Baluyot, 2017). The reason for this could very well be due to the stipulations of the Voluntary Placement Agreement. Many foster youths are not interested in returning to a foster home to live once they turn 18. In fact, there are several youths who end up returning to their biological families to live because they have nowhere else to go, leading to an unhealthy and volatile cycle of risk factors that prevent them from success.

Fortunately, there are other placement options that a young adult can choose from aside from a foster care facility. A college dormitory also suffices as an approved placement. However, there are not nearly as many foster youths that are enrolled in postsecondary education for various reasons. The Education Commission of the States claims that, of the 415,000 foster youth in care, less than 3% obtain a bachelor's degree (Sarubbi, Parker, & Sponsler, 2016). Even with assistance from the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) or NC Reach, many foster youths do not remain in college due to risk factors that negatively impact educational attainment. So, for most young adults, a college dormitory may not be a long-term placement option. Lastly, the option to live with an extended relative or family friend may not be feasible due to the fact that they simply may not know anyone that is trustworthy and dependable enough to live with. These barriers make it difficult for young adults who want to participate in Foster Care 18-21 to do so because they do not have a placement that they feel that they can call home. It is important for organizations and individuals in the community to collaborate with county welfare agencies to

create living accommodations for young adults to be able to live independently in a safe environment and receive the benefits of the program.

Stakeholders/Costs & Benefits

Because the foster youths are the direct recipients of the Foster Care 18-21 program, they deserve to have a stake moving forward with further amendments to the policy. They are the group that is most affected by changes in the policy and should have a say in how services are delivered to be most effective.

In order to ensure that all foster youth who qualify for the program are able to receive benefits, it is important to know how much it costs to fund the extended program. Since North Carolina is a part of Title IV-E reimbursement, any funds that are used to support services under the Fostering Connections Act are given back by the federal government. However, because there are 25 other states that also receive Title IV-E reimbursement, there is a chance that a change in budget could negatively affect how long funding to each state will last. On the other hand, it is imperative that charitable organizations and other individuals who have the resources to provide support offer their assets, time and effort into helping to continue the work of the policy even if federal funding is exhausted in the future.

Conclusion

Overall, I feel that this policy is well-written and has the best interest of the young adult at the forefront. However, I do believe that the Voluntary Placement Agreement needs to be revisited because it may be the reason why many youths are not interested in participating in the Foster Care 18-21 program. I'm unsure whether this is a portion of the policy that needs to be included at all and should maybe only be limited to ensuring that wherever the young adult is living is safe and equipped with basic needs. Also, I think that most of the young adults who are asked to participate in the program may decline because the idea of remaining in foster care after

age 18 is not appealing. It is important that social workers who are speaking with their youth about Foster Care 18-21 emphasize the fact that the program is intended to allow the individual to make their own decisions and have a say in who is a part of their lives while also providing the support that nearly all 18-21 year olds need whether they're in foster care or not.

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