



Report

Transition to Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care in the District of Columbia

*A Summary of Information-Gathering Activities,
Recommendations, and Next Steps for Improvement*

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Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction	1
Summary of Recent Aftercare Outcomes	2
Summary of Stakeholder Concerns	2
Aftercare Meetings and Focus Groups	3
Initial Aftercare Forum: June 2015	3
Youth Focus Groups: September/October 2015	4
Stakeholder Discussion Groups.....	6
Second Aftercare Forum: October 2015.....	7
Meetings to Review Formal Recommendations.....	8
Ongoing Older Youth Engagement Strategies	8
Direct Connect	9
Foster Care Alumni Board	9
Changes Implemented to Address Emergent Needs	9
Provider Contracts	9
Transition Services	10
Transitional Housing Programs	11
Summary of Recommendations	11
Next Steps	12
Appendix: Stakeholder Recommendations	i
Attachment A: Position Description for Aftercare Program Supervisor.....	vi
Attachment B: Issue of Concern Regarding Evidence to Outcomes (ETO).....	viii
Attachment C: A New CFSA Aftercare Model: Rational and Program Overview.....	ix
Attachment D: Recommendations and Action Steps for Improving Current Aftercare Programming.....	xiii
Attachment E: Citizens Review Panel Recommendations.....	xv

Introduction

In 2015, the District of Columbia's (DC) Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) initiated a self-assessment and sought input from community stakeholders and youth to evaluate and improve aftercare services for young adults who age out of the child welfare system.¹ Throughout the process, community-based partners—particularly the Children's Law Center, Citizen Review Panel, and Young Women's Project—augmented efforts to analyze data and synthesize stakeholder input. These partners conducted research, submitted reports, and provided public testimony regarding the need to improve support for youth in foster care as they develop life skills and transition to independent adulthood. In addition to identifying ways to improve practice, CFSA also wanted to establish standard outcomes that reflected youth input as well as the collective expertise of professionals.

Throughout the year, CFSA gathered feedback from two forums and six additional meetings. In gathering and subsequently sharing input, staff worked with the following stakeholder groups:

- Attorneys for children and parents
- Center for the Study of Social Policy, court-appointed monitor for the *LaShawn* lawsuit
- CFSA executives, managers, and specialists working with older youth and community partner
- Citizen Review Panel
- DC Department of Behavioral Health
- Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives (Collaboratives)
- Local advocacy organizations the Children's Law Center and Young Women's Project
- Youth currently and formerly in foster care

Based on recommendations stemming from this work, two improvement strategies were authorized in January 2016:

- Creation of a **revised aftercare program model** that will guide providers in serving young adults, ages 21 to 23, who age out of District foster care
- Internal coordination at CFSA to establish a **transition-to-adulthood planning continuum** for youth ages 14 to 21 in foster care and young adults ages 21 to 23 who have exited care²

This report summarizes the following information related to transition planning and aftercare in the District of Columbia:

¹ Aftercare services are available to all youth in foster care who age out of the District child welfare system on their 21st birthday. Services date back to 2003 when community-based professionals first joined permanency social workers to discuss youth transitioning to independence. Presently, CFSA has contracts for aftercare services with the five Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives, which are strategically located in District neighborhoods. Services include, but are not limited to, counseling and referrals regarding housing, employment, training, education, life skills, financial planning, health, mental health, parenting, legal services, public benefits, and donated goods. The Collaboratives may also use funds to meet urgent practical needs in areas such as transportation.

² Although CFSA will establish a planning continuum to support youth up to age 23, the Agency will continue to transfer case management responsibilities to the aftercare provider when a youth reaches age 21.

- Recent data and outcomes
- Stakeholder concerns
- Stakeholder feedback-gathering activities conducted in 2015
- Youth-driven, information-gathering activities that inform practice
- Practices that were amended or adopted at the organizational and direct-service levels
- Recommendations resulting from the work-to-date
- An update on the status of prospective evaluation and service models

Summary of Recent Aftercare Outcomes

In fiscal year (FY) 2015, the Collaboratives providing aftercare services enrolled 99 young adults in the program and subsequently engaged 83 in some level of case management. Using their data collection and reporting system called Efforts to Outcomes (ETO), the Collaboratives provided these summary (i.e., cross-collaborative) outcomes, as required in their contracts with CFSA.

Collaboratives' Reported Summary Outcomes

- o 100 percent of participants had some form of housing.
- o 73 percent were participating in a vocational and/or educational program.
- o 81 percent had employment.
- o 64-93 percent of goals identified in closed cases were achieved.
- o 73-84 percent of services outlined in open cases had been provided and/or facilitated.

In October and November, 2015, an independent consultant working with CFSA on the Aftercare assessment and improvement process reviewed this ETO data in more detail.³ After consulting with the Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) specialists about the population of emancipating youth, and reviewing the individual aftercare providers' data reports with quality assurance personnel from the Collaboratives, the consultant observed that the summary outcomes did not fully portray the results achieved by participants. For example, she noted that while 100 percent of participants had some form of housing, only 39 percent had permanent housing.

Collaboratives' Additional Reported Outcomes

- o 39 percent had permanent housing.
- o 46 percent had completed an educational benchmark.
- o 34 percent had full-time employment.
- o 17 percent completed all goals or had all identified family functioning areas addressed.

³ Since the summer of 2015, CFSA has contracted with Wendy Jacobson, an independent consultant with over 30 years of experience advising policymakers and service delivery professionals in the health and human services field.

- o 22 percent were unresponsive after engagement or receiving services.

In addition, the consultant found that only 16 percent of the 98 young adults who were referred by CFSA's Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) to the Collaboratives for pre-transition relationship-building were, in fact, engaged.

This latter set of findings confirmed a need to improve outcomes across the aftercare spectrum and to modify the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) system to increase consistency and ensure that all desired program outcomes were fully captured by the system. A more detailed presentation of the issues of concern related to the ETO system can be found in the Appendix.

Summary of Stakeholder Concerns

In addition to recognizing the need for greater achievement of outcomes, CFSA gained significant insights from listening to various groups of stakeholders. Some of these findings are summarized below.

- Young adults in aftercare:⁴
 - o Services can be inflexible, unreliable, uninformed, ineffective, and emotionally and experientially disconnected.
 - o More time, more contact, more capacity, and more urgency are needed.
- Aftercare providers:
 - o Youth come into care with significant barriers (e.g., mental health problems, lack of connection to the community, children of their own, educational deficits).
 - o Resources are abundant for some needs but scarce for others, especially housing with customized support services.
 - o CFSA program expectations are not fully clear and often unrealistic.
- Advocates:
 - o CFSA's focus is on practice and policy outcomes, not youth outcomes.
 - o Key services and capacity building with youth start far too late.
 - o Knowledge and perceptions about program services and resources are confused and inconsistent.
 - o Youth are not playing real leadership roles in their own aftercare.
 - o Aftercare is not effectively marketed to youth.
 - o The traditional 1:1 case management model (which is *not* the most effective for this population) is too deeply embedded in the current system.

⁴ Youth feedback was provided in CFSA's February 2015 Oversight Testimony, in addition to a written report by the Young Women's Project and two youth focus groups.

Aftercare Meetings and Focus Groups

Initial Aftercare Forum: June 2015

On June 9, 2015, CFSA held the first aftercare forum. A broad group of internal and external stakeholders attended. They are listed in the introduction to this report. The Collaboratives gave an overview of their aftercare services. They discussed challenges and lessons learned in order to inform the participants about the service delivery structure and options for youth. Forum participants then discussed youth needs and recommendations for improvement. Themes centered on youth engagement strategies, limited housing resources, need for a creative approach to service delivery, and need for a model based on realistic outcomes.

Youth Engagement: A common concern centered on the struggle to engage youth who have certain mental health issues but do not qualify for or refuse to receive treatment. Even when engaged, some participants characterized this population as particularly difficult to connect to employment opportunities. Some stakeholders discussed barriers that stem from a lack of meaningful connection to family or community. In general, it was observed that a history of instability and lack of family support can hinder a youth's motivation to engage and persevere in the face of the challenges inherent in the major life transition from foster care to self-support.

All parties agreed that a successful aftercare provider must connect with clients earlier in the transition process. This could promote greater engagement with a population that tends to have trust issues. Based on current resources, however, it remains unclear how directing efforts toward earlier engagement may affect provider capacity to serve those already in need of aftercare.

The Collaboratives expressed that a strength in aftercare services has been their relationship with OYE. OYE has made greater efforts to involve the Collaboratives earlier in the transition planning process, to provide consistent and reliable communication, to hold the Collaboratives accountable, and to administer Rapid Housing funds effectively.⁵

Limited Affordable Housing: Stakeholders cited a severe shortage of affordable and available housing in the District as a significant barrier for both unemployed youth and low-wage earners. Strategies to address the issue included rental assistance, shared accommodations, and transitional housing programs. Stakeholders agreed it will take significant work to address this challenge.

⁵ Rapid Housing is a shared effort among CFSA, the Collaboratives, and the DC Housing Authority (DCHA). DCHA administers payments while the Collaboratives provide case management and support services. In addition to providing short-term assistance to families in need of stable housing for family preservation or reunification, Rapid Housing provides time-limited assistance to eligible transitioning youth to prevent homelessness and facilitate their transition to independence.

Service Delivery Model: Given the many barriers youth face during the transition to independence, creative approaches to engagement and services are necessary, including youth-friendly methods of communication and broad, open-minded exploration of all possible housing resources. In addition, the CFSA director stated a need to shift away from a traditional model toward a preventive approach. This precipitated what would become an ongoing series of discussions about how to reduce the need for intensive aftercare services by engaging youth in meaningful transition planning from a much earlier age.

Conclusion: In closing this first forum, the CFSA director noted the critical need for youth to participate in future discussions involving aftercare. Facilitators reminded stakeholders that this forum was a starting point for a series of meetings and activities intended to evaluate models and approaches.

Youth Focus Groups: September/October 2015

To obtain the youth perspective, two stakeholder groups conducted youth focus groups in the fall of 2015.

Youth Focus Group #1: On September 23, 2015, CFSA's independent consultant, in partnership with the Young Women's Project (YWP), held a focus group with four young adults involved in YWP's Foster Care Campaign.⁶ Youth participants included three young women who had aged out of foster care within the past 18 months and were currently connected with aftercare providers, and one young man who had been forced out of his adoptive home before age 21. Several themes emerged from their responses.

- Outreach from aftercare providers has not been sufficient to meet the needs of young adults—or at least does not reflect that repeated attempts are often needed.
- Young adults in aftercare cannot be approached in the same manner as a typical client in other service areas. Aftercare social workers must remember that the needs of young adults can arise at any time of day or night.
- Key areas of service need include college, employment, childcare, transportation, and mental health.
- Transition planning must begin earlier than age 20.⁷

The main recommendations involved best practices for youth engagement. The young adults indicated that they would have a better working relationship with their aftercare provider if engagement took place well before the transition out of foster care. Also, they specifically requested to work with

⁶ The YWP Foster Care Campaign trains current and former foster youth as leaders and advocates who educate their peers and improve institutions. Regarding the evaluation of transition planning and aftercare services in the District, YWP has been instrumental in helping young women and men to research conditions, identify needs, and articulate recommendations in focus groups, public testimony, and written reports.

⁷ The young adults had differing opinions regarding the optimal age to begin discussing topics such as post-secondary education and housing. While some felt that it is never too early to prepare youth for important decisions, others cautioned against the danger of overwhelming younger teens.

professionals who are always available, sensitive to particular needs, well trained, motivational, knowledgeable, and constantly mindful of the fact that they are dealing with a life.

Youth Focus Group # 2: On October 14, 2015, the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) facilitated a focus group around aftercare.⁸ The discussion took place at the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative and included three CRP representatives, a CFSA planning specialist, and four young adults involved in aftercare services. While the young adults described varied experiences regarding service engagement, housing stability, employment progress, and connection to the community, several themes emerged.

- It was beneficial to take advantage of the pre-transition supports that OYE offered. Helpful services included career guidance, money for public-transit fare cards, clothing vouchers, referral to vocational training and certification programs, and financial support for college.
- East River Family Strengthening Collaborative is a good support in terms of communication and persistence in helping pursue services, benefits, and professional goals.
- Housing and finances are particularly challenging after aging out of foster care.
 - Those who age out without steady employment, stable housing, or a committed support network are at risk of homelessness.
 - Those linked with transitional housing feel pressured by time-limited program requirements (e.g., 60 days to find a job in order to remain at Wayne Place). Such pressures positively motivate some while unduly stressing others.
- Some young adults are capable of saving and managing money, but others need financial literacy training.
- Transition planning does not begin early enough.⁹

Primary recommendations that emerged from the the second group discussion focused on more candid and realistic preparation for the world that awaits young adults transitioning out of care. They want honest discussions about harsh economic conditions as well as forewarning of consequences so that they will keep themselves accountable and responsible. More needs to be done earlier in the foster care experience to prepare children and youth for these pressures. For example, placement providers need to hold youth accountable and impose consequences for irresponsible behavior as opposed to unconditionally providing them with cash stipends. Additional recommendations included aftercare social workers who are professionally trained and have an understanding of client backgrounds, respecting confidentiality, and being committed to achieving successful outcomes as determined by the young adults.

⁸ CRP is a federally mandated group of citizens who serve as an external, independent oversight body for the child welfare system. The local CRP evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of District Government agencies involved in child protection as well as community-based services that CFSA purchases from local non-profit providers. Like the YWP, CRP has been instrumental in informing aftercare discussions in stakeholder meetings and by submitting reports based on research and information-gathering activities in the community.

⁹ As with the YWP focus group, the young adults had mixed opinions regarding the optimal age to begin transition planning. Some believed they would have been motivated to begin as early as age 13—yet others felt they were not even in a place where they could discuss such matters before age 18.

Stakeholder Discussion Groups

After the initial aftercare forum in June 2015, CFSA formally convened stakeholders for six follow-up meetings. Under the direction of the CFSA leadership team, with assistance from the independent consultant, meetings evolved from information-sharing discussions to strategy-building sessions. Recently, efforts progressed toward creation of two documents that will directly inform transition planning and aftercare service models for the coming fiscal year.¹⁰

Stakeholder Meeting to Review Themes, Data, and Recommended Best Practices: On September 25, 2015, CFSA reconvened a subgroup of representatives from organizations that participated in the initial forum. The purpose was to reach a collective understanding of themes, examine program data reports, and review youth input collected up to that time. Participants also reviewed the following 10 best-rated aftercare practices, which the consultant had identified, and discussed their applicability in the District.

- Use a positive youth development framework.
- Systematically build relationships with caring adults and communities.
- Start early.
- Support a highly effective aftercare workforce.
- Actively collaborate with a broad group of community partners.
- Actively collaborate with all associated government agencies and initiatives.
- Collect and use a broad set of data.
- Systematically identify and address needed policy changes.
- Make financial education a top priority.
- Build pathways to employment.

Stakeholders shared the following strategies:

- Blend case management with mentoring.
- Build or lease more transitional living facilities.
- Find actual resources to support a system where services are often in the form of referrals.
- Market the aftercare experience in a way that inspires youth to engage.
- Identify and serve those transitioning youth who are not participating in aftercare.

The timing of planning and engagement were also key themes. In particular, the group concluded that youth need a foundation of transitional skills well before exiting care. Aftercare social workers need to engage youth well before they age out.

Stakeholder Meeting to Discuss Strategies for Effective Service Delivery: On October 6 and October 9, 2015, stakeholders reconvened, this time including two CFSA employees in their early 20s who were formerly in foster care. These meetings marked an evolution to a more forward-focused dialogue, less

¹⁰ See *Transition to Adulthood Benchmarks and Outcomes*, which is available under separate cover. The Aftercare Program Model Scope of Work is currently under review.

about challenges and more about concrete strategies for effective service. Discussion centered on a Ten-Point Aftercare Framework that the CFSA consultant had designed. It included the following domains:

- Staff capacity and training needs
- Job requirements
- Staffing plan
- Program expertise
- Best practices
- Marketing and communication of aftercare
- Support for external relationships
- Meeting key needs
- Hiring youth
- Evaluating services¹¹

Second Aftercare Forum: October 2015

On October 22, 2015, CFSA held a second aftercare forum to review feedback and recommendations from the focus group and small work group and to obtain participant ideas for pursuing priorities in the Ten-Point Aftercare Framework. In addition to participants who attended the initial forum, two current aftercare clients attended in order to share their experiences, needs, observations, and recommendations. After reviewing progress over the past several months, stakeholders recognized a need for additional action steps to inform young people of their rights and responsibilities, and to develop agreed-upon outcomes to achieve an effective aftercare model.

CFSA's consultant introduced seven priority aftercare outcomes in the following domains:

- Relationships
- Education
- Employment
- Health (physical, mental, sexual)
- Housing
- Financial management
- Parenting

The consultant presented a proposed aftercare model that emphasized the following objectives:

- Outcomes-based approach
- Exposure through experiential learning
- Accommodation of differing needs
- Prioritization of time spent with young adults
- Mentoring

¹¹ The consultant synthesized suggestions and theories that emerged from these meetings in a summary of action steps, which, along with feedback from subsequent meetings, is included in her recommendations (Attachment D).

To help achieve the objectives, the model included the following domains:

- Staff characteristics
- Training and supervision
- Staff tenure
- Practice methods
- Caseload management
- Incentives and resources for youth
- Marketing and communication of aftercare services
- The role of CFSA leadership¹²

The forum concluded with a discussion of next steps including:

- Additional workgroups to refine the aftercare model with more detailed outcomes and benchmarks
- Application of the new model to current programming
- Design and development of a Scope of Work for improved aftercare services in FY2017

Meetings to Review Formal Recommendations

Based on feedback from the meetings and focus groups, CFSA’s consultant drafted two documents: *Transition-to-Adulthood Benchmarks and Outcomes* and *Aftercare Program Model and Scope of Work*. On January 6, 2016, two separate work groups (consisting of CFSA personnel, advocates, and aftercare providers) reviewed the documents and discussed plans on moving forward with the recommendations.

Ongoing Older Youth Engagement Strategies

In 2015, the CFSA director launched an ongoing strategy of Authentic Youth Engagement, based on youth-driven, agency-supported discussion groups for both youth in the system and foster care “alumni.”¹³ Observations and recommendations that emerge from youth and alumni groups can be valuable in establishing outcomes and practices. To this end, group leaders help CFSA specialists by sharing any helpful transition and aftercare-related feedback that these activities produce. CFSA employees who had formerly been in foster care also provide peer support.

¹² Details of the model are incorporated into the consultant’s recommendations document in the Appendix.

¹³ *Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships* is a Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative that engages young adults in planning and decision-making regarding their own lives and the larger community. The focus is on making youth feel respected, valued, trusted, safe, and comfortable. Moreover, young adults have their voices heard and are given the opportunity to make decisions, gain leadership skills, and see their ideas realized.

Youth-Driven, CFSA-Supported Discussion Group

In August 2015, the CFSA director began a youth-driven supported discussion group facilitated by two CFSA employees who had formerly been in foster care. The director, and deputy director for Program Operations met with the initial group of youth currently in foster care, ages 15 to 20. Subsequent to this meeting, regular standing discussion groups, referred to as “Peer Plug” sessions, are taking place. The purpose has been to engage youth in open dialogue regarding their foster care experience, their needs, and their future. The following main topics have emerged during the four meetings held to date:

- Overcoming mental health challenges
- Building trust with adults
- Career development
- The importance of good decision making

Foster Care Alumni Board

CFSA formed a Foster Care Alumni Board that held its inaugural meeting in March 2016. The CFSA director and two CFSA employees formerly in foster care will facilitate future meetings which will be held on a regular basis. The board will hold open discussions that encourage participants to share their experiences, observations, needs, and recommendations. Their input is valuable as the CFSA works to improve transition planning and aftercare services.

Changes Implemented to Address Emergent Needs

Provider Contracts

In 2015, CFSA’s Community Partnerships Administration revised existing aftercare contracts to ensure additional supports, promote more structured youth engagement protocols, and clarify service expectations. The following major revisions were included:

- The aftercare provider must give \$100 each month to youth engaged in aftercare services. Youth should use these funds to cover transportation costs related to education, employment, housing searches, and personal development.
- The aftercare provider must participate in youth transition planning (YTP) meetings on a quarterly basis between the youth’s 20th and 21st birthdays. During the final quarter leading up to the youth’s transition, aftercare workers must attend monthly YTP meetings and also facilitate access to transitional services.

- Once the youth transitions into aftercare status, the provider must initiate contact with the youth monthly to ensure progress on YTP goals. Contact and work on the case must comply with the Collaboratives' practice standards, including two face-to-face monthly visits.
- The aftercare provider may change the case status to "inactive" only after repeated efforts to meet with the youth or after a youth directly refuses services. The provider must carefully document disengagement after making a minimum of five documented attempts to engage the youth over a period of 60 days.
- Every 30 days, the aftercare provider must update the Youth Transition Aftercare Plan, documenting case management and services provided to young adults during their aftercare period.
- The aftercare provider must complete a post-assessment of a youth's status before closing the aftercare case and must provide it to CFSA.

Transition Services

Even before initiation of the forums, OYE had been revising supports and protocols to reflect feedback from youth and their social workers. In particular, issues raised about the amounts and processing times for certain financial supports led to changes.

Transitional Care Package (TCP) Funds: OYE uses some Chafee Foster Care Independence Program funds to purchase retail store gift cards that young adults transitioning out of care can use to buy household necessities. Late in 2013, youth feedback inspired an increase in these funds. As a result, in April 2014, CFSA revised the Older Youth Services Policy to increase funding from \$500 to \$1,000. To be eligible, youth must have been in care at the time of their 15th birthday and must either be aging out of care or having their case closed.

Rapid Housing Approval Timeline: Another change that OYE put into policy in April 2014 involved streamlining approval for the Rapid Housing program. Rapid Housing program staff must interview applicants within three to five business days of referral. Applications, which previously had to go through several layers of approval, are reviewed by the OYE program manager and the CFSA principal deputy director only. Turnaround for application review is typically five business days. Program personnel inform the social worker and youth of the decision within one business day. These changes cut approval time in half—from 20 days to 10 days.

Transitional Housing Programs

Wayne Place: In April 2015, CFSA began referring eligible youth to the Wayne Place Project, a joint effort of CFSA and the DC Department of Behavioral Health (DBH). It provides housing and supportive services for young adults aging out of foster care or returning to the community from residential mental

health treatment.¹⁴ The program provides a real-life community experience that helps the young adults to engage and participate in a community environment. CFSA and DBH work closely with the Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative and its on-site program administrator to coordinate daily services and to review policies and procedures to ensure optimum services that promote a positive transition to independence. CFSA's "half" of the program can serve 20 youth at a time, ages 21 to 23, for up to 18 months.

Project Genesis: On October 30, 2015, a renovated facility with an innovative community model opened its doors to young mothers transitioning out of foster care. Project Genesis allows CFSA to refer up to eight young mothers and their children to an apartment building that is also home to active seniors and some low-income families. Under the model from Generations of Hope, an on-site team facilitates all residents in giving and receiving help as needed within the community. The Georgia Avenue Family Support Collaborative also works with the project to ensure that the young mothers and their children are connected to community-based services. The moms and their children can stay in their apartments indefinitely as long as the mother is able to move from a period of subsidized rent to self support.

Summary of Recommendations

The independent consultant's report provided the following recommendations for the FY2017 scope of work:

- Six recommendations for improving the aftercare program (summarized below)
- Position description for an aftercare supervisor
- Issues regarding the Collaboratives' ETO reporting system
- Rationale and program overview for a new CFSA aftercare program model
- Recommendations and action steps for improving current aftercare programming

In addition to incorporating researched best practices and feedback from the discussions described in this report, recommendations align with those of CRP's Taskforce on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.¹⁵

The consultant's complete report is in the Appendix. Below is a summary of her recommendations.¹⁶

1. Designate Leadership and Staffing for the Program¹⁷

Rationale: It is critically important for CFSA to place someone in charge of aftercare and create a staffing infrastructure to deliver the active support and oversight the program requires.

¹⁴ The program uses the Transition to Independence Process (TIP) model™ to engage and support youth.

¹⁵ Taskforce recommendations were initially provided in the CRP Annual Report for 2014. In the 2015 report, the taskforce addressed CFSA's progress in improving aftercare and also offered additional recommendations for concrete steps toward full implementation.

¹⁶ For more detail, including action steps to support each recommendation, see the complete report in the Appendix.

¹⁷ CFSA staffing resources will align with program outcomes.

2. Establish Expanded, Uniform Outcome Measures

Rationale: CFSA must have a comprehensive, Agency-wide slate of outcome measures that reflect both stability and adult competency goals for youth and young adults, ages 14 to 25. This will promote alignment of case management efforts and improve overall results. Further, a uniform system will support consistency in definitions, measures, and outcomes.

3. Change the Program Model

Rationale: Best practices in the field do not recommend predominant use of the 1:1 case management model for older youth and young adults. Rather, best practices endorse youth partnership and positive youth development models.

4. Ensure Strong Intra-Agency Transitions and Communication

Rationale: Robust, ongoing connections among social workers—and between social workers and young adults—are needed to support youth during key transitions, including the transition from foster care to independent adulthood.

5. Start Substantive Transition to Adulthood Work Earlier

Rationale: Best practices support starting deliberate, consistent, transition-to-adulthood work when a young person enters high school, around age 14. At CFSA, this timeline must be consistently incorporated into the case management framework in addition to performance expectations.

6. Make Feasible, Priority Program Improvements Before FY 2017 Changes

Rationale: Waiting until FY2017 to make any operational changes to the program would mean losing a full nine months during which aftercare participants could be better served—equal to more than one-third of a young adult’s total time in the program. A number of priority improvements are feasible without contract modification as long as interim program leadership is in place to execute them.

Next Steps

Benefitting from the insight and commitment of valued partners throughout the District, CFSA is now moving to refine, formalize, and implement changes to the transition-planning framework. CFSA’s director authorized two concurrent initiatives that will promote successful transition to adulthood.

- Youth and stakeholder recommendations led to creation of a revised aftercare scope of work as well as standardized benchmarks and outcomes that will form the basis of provider contracts starting in FY 2017. The scope of work is intended to preserve breadth and diversity in terms of prospective contract bidders. To this end, the Agency will be prepared to consider providers

with centralized operating locations, as well as community-based hubs throughout the District. In either case, a successful contract bid will have to demonstrate accessibility, mobility, and familiarity with all District wards. CFSA is prepared to award anywhere from one to four aftercare contracts, based on the structure and capacity of the most suitable prospective providers. Other requirements will include mandatory pre-emancipation timelines for youth engagement, including participation in transition planning activities, and mandatory post-emancipation timelines for maintaining client contact. The contractor will be required to provide and facilitate a range of opportunities for leadership, skill development and capacity-building across the spectrum of positive outcome domains. Additionally, the contractor must demonstrate an ability to provide an up-to-date and accessible flow of information about governmental and non-governmental programs and resources.

- In March of 2016, CFSA began holding internal meetings to convert recommendations into daily practice and to coordinate all administrations in a comprehensive transition-planning continuum. The new framework will initiate youth preparation for independent adulthood at age 14 and will provide experiences, opportunities, and guidance beyond the transfer of case management responsibilities to the aftercare provider at age 21 and up to age of 23.

Agency leadership and staff expect these substantive actions will promote more meaningful youth engagement, dedicated service, and positive outcomes. ■

Recommendations for Improving the Aftercare Program

Aftercare Vision: A program that flows seamlessly from earlier CFSA interventions, to build adult capacities and competencies while also building participants' stability.

#1: Designate Leadership and Staffing for the Program

Rationale:

Nobody at CFSA is “in charge” of aftercare, nor is there a staffing infrastructure to deliver the active support and oversight the program (any program) requires.

Resolving this problem is necessary to successfully undertaking any other short- or long-term program improvement actions. It is the most critical of these recommendations.

Recommended Action Steps:

1. Agency commits to establishing the leadership position and unit staffing required to fulfill these four key functions: a) management and oversight; b) program development; c) evaluation; and d) communications and marketing.
2. Interim appointment and staff reassignments are made so critical work can begin immediately.
3. Position description is finalized (draft at Attachment A).
4. Position is filled; staffing is aligned.
5. Expectations and systems are established for regularly incorporating participant feedback into program management and decision-making.

#2: Establish Expanded, Unified Outcome Measures

(Aligns with CRP recommendations 7, 8, 9)

Rationale:

CFSA does not have a comprehensive, Agency-wide slate of outcome measures reflecting both stability and adult competency goals for youth and young adults ages 14-25. This gap leads to delimited case management efforts, role confusion among workers, cross-program finger-pointing, and poor results overall. Further, the narrowly circumscribed ETO measurement system has some significant internal flaws, e.g., inconsistent definitions, misaligned measures, outcomes delinked from actual results, and no denominators.

Recommended Action Steps:

1. Draft benchmarks and outcomes have been developed in consultation with internal and external stakeholders. They must be vetted internally and further refined.
2. Agency leadership adopts new benchmarks and outcomes.
3. Align performance measures for staff *in all units* (permanency, in-home, OYE, aftercare), and for contracted providers, with the new benchmarks and outcomes.
4. Modify ETO (the Collaboratives' measurement system) to resolve internal problems and enhance data-gathering for the remainder of the current FY (summary of ETO concerns at Attachment B).

#3: Change the Program Model

(Aligns with CRP recommendations 9, 10)

Rationale:

The primary intervention model used in the aftercare program (1:1 case management) is not well-suited to the participant population or to achieving program objectives. Best practices in the field do not recommend predominant use of this model for older youth or young adults, but instead endorse a youth partnership and positive youth development model (More detail on the rationale for a program model change is at Attachment C).

Recommended Action Steps:

1. New FY2017 scope of work is finalized, approved, and moved to contracting.
2. Aftercare program director ensures program is implemented consistent with scope.
3. Young adult advisory group undertakes program rebranding.

#4: Ensure Strong Intra-Agency Transitions & Communication

(Aligns with CRP recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4)

Rationale:

Youth under Agency supervision until transition out of foster care pass through two key “transition” points: from their case-carrying social worker to OYE and from OYE to aftercare. Despite established processes for these transitions, they often do not occur as specified. Robust, on-going connections between social workers -- and between social workers and young adults -- are an exception.

Recommended Action Steps:

1. Small staff group (including in-home, permanency, OYE, YAC) assesses current intra-agency transition processes: a) reviews current procedures and success rates; b) identifies problems and challenges; c) develops recommended changes to protocols and practice.
2. Recommendations are implemented.
3. In-home, Permanency, OYE and YAC program supervisors convene at six month intervals to reassess and recommend needed modifications to transition processes.
4. Expectations are put in place for routine resource and information-sharing across OYE and YAC, particularly on employment and housing.

#5: Start Substantive Transition-to-Adulthood Work Earlier

(Aligns with CRP recommendation #1)

Rationale:

Best practice supports beginning deliberate, consistent, transition-to-adulthood work when a young person enters high school, around age 14. At CFSA, this work does not begin in earnest until 17 when, by Agency policy, youth are referred to OYE; it often begins later. Although YTPs initiate at 15, the majority of case-carrying social workers do not conduct substantive “transition-to-adulthood” work with youth on their caseloads. As a result, youth start this critical work far too late, compressing their efforts into timeframes not likely to yield the desired results.

Recommended Action Steps:

1. A small group of in-home and permanency staff assesses barriers to substantive “transition-to-adulthood” work with caseload youth and makes recommendations.
2. Agency leadership makes structural, training and/or hiring adjustments needed to implement those recommendations.
3. In-home, Permanency, OYE and YAC program supervisors reassess and recommend further changes every six months.

#6: Make Feasible, Priority Program Improvements Prior to FY17 Changes.

Rationale:

Waiting until FY2017 to make any operational changes to the program means losing a full nine months during which aftercare participants can be better-served -- equal to more than 1/3 of a young adult’s total time in the program. There are a number of priority improvements that are feasible without contract modification, as long as interim program leadership is in place to execute them.

Recommendations

Under CFSA's current staffing, it is not clear who would be responsible for taking these steps. Establishing interim leadership for the aftercare program (while appointment of a permanent program supervisor and staff are considered) is suggested. Additional detail about the action steps for each recommendation are at Attachment D.

1. Develop resource information tool for program social workers and participants (aligns with CRP #1).
2. Provide 1-2 additional training sessions for staff (on engaging difficult-to-reach young adults and navigating relevant city systems) and program participants (on workforce training and relationship management/conflict resolution) (aligns with CRP #7).
3. Assess and make improvements to practice on referring program participants to supportive resources.
4. Resolve identified customer service/intake concerns.
5. Conduct caseload assessment across Collaboratives to troubleshoot current over- and under-staffing concerns.
6. Sponsor one or two young-adult-led gatherings about program benefits & opportunities (aligns with CRP #1).
7. Launch quarterly meetings for Collaboratives' direct service providers (aligns with CRP #4).

Attachment A

Position Description: Aftercare Program Supervisor

The CFSA aftercare program supports young adults who have exited foster care to build and solidify an identified set of adult capacities and competencies while also maintaining life stability. Aftercare programming is provided by community-based agencies that are contracted through a competitive process.

Critical to the success of aftercare program providers is a central infrastructure that delivers active support and oversight of the program. The aftercare program supervisor leads this central infrastructure, directing a team of staff and reporting to the Deputy Director for Community Partnerships.

Also critical to the success of aftercare is vigorous alignment and coordination with CFSA teen programming that begins when youth enter high school (around age 14) and continues through age 21. The aftercare program supervisor therefore works in close collaboration with the Permanency and In-Home directors (and their staff who provide dedicated early teen programming to youth in those divisions), as well as with the OYE director and staff.

The aftercare program supervisor will lead the implementation of the new aftercare strategy and will be responsible for the following tasks:

- Consistent excellent practice and equitable resource distribution by providers
- Resolving systems barriers that reduce the effectiveness of the aftercare program, both internally (i.e., within CFSA) and externally (i.e., within and across partner agencies)
- Convening -- or supporting the convening of -- an alumni youth advisory board and an expert board on community resources, and linking the work of these bodies to aftercare programming
- Executing a robust marketing and communications strategy that encourages participant engagement and facilitates individuals' progress by maintaining up-to-date information about key resources and opportunities
- Ensuring effective intra-agency transitions into early teen programming, and from

early teen programming into OYE; from OYE into aftercare, and out of aftercare

- Reviewing and reporting on program and outcome data, and designing and implementing needed improvements

Attachment B

Issues of Concern Regarding ETO

Aftercare providers are contractually obligated to achieve specified outcomes with young adults in five areas: 1) provision of services, 2) goal completion, 3) housing, 4) education, and 5) employment. The ETO data collection and reporting system used by the Collaboratives is in its first year of operations and there are a number of concerns that should be addressed.

Outcome Area	Contractual Obligation	FY 2015 Result	Issues of concern
Service provision/delivery	90% of identified services are provided or facilitated.	73-96% of services are provided (FY2014 data); range reflects differences in individual Collaboratives' rates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision/facilitation of services is not defined. Does simply "making a referral" count? There is no indication of the results of the services. This indicator is only reported for new cases and not re-reported in subsequent quarters so all work is not captured.
Goal completion	70% of identified goals are achieved in "successfully closed" cases.	17% of youth have completed all goals or had all identified family functioning areas addressed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report and contract measures are different/not comparable This outcome is only reported for closed cases so all work is not captured.
Housing	85% have housing upon "successful case closure."	100% had some form of housing; 39% had permanent housing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contract uses OYE definition of housing: "stable housing," "transitional shelter," "residing with others." The report uses three different categories: "permanent," "temporary," "transitional." Report provides housing status for all cases active during FY2015, not "successful case closures." Report does not indicate whether recipients were housed (or had all housing arrangements completed) upon entering AC (credit to AC may not be due). Report does not provide a denominator (# needing housing) to put the outcome in context. As a point-in-time count, report does inform on stability of housing arrangements.
Education	75% participate in vocational and/or educational program.	73% enrolled or completed trade or cert. class, GED, HS diploma or college.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contract requires participation; report is measuring participation and completion. Report does not indicate recipients' educational program status upon entering aftercare contract (credit may not be due). Report does not provide denominators to put the outcomes in context. Not discernible whether there is overlap between recipients counted.
Employment	65% shall have employment	72% had full or part-time employment; 34% had full-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contract does not specify degrees of employment or stipulate longevity/stability.

		time employment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report does not indicate recipients' employment status upon entering aftercare contract (credit may not be due). • Report does not provide denominators to put the outcomes in context.
Misc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aftercare contract requires acceptance of all OYE referrals at 19.5 years. The report indicates the # of these pre-transition enrollments but there is no denominator to put it in context. • The Collaboratives' quarterly assessment reports only provide data on two indicators (service provision and goal completion). 		

Attachment C

A New CFSA Aftercare Model: Rationale and Program Overview

A Struggling Program

The CFSA aftercare program became the subject of review due to significant concerns about its effectiveness. Data show that among the 83 young adults served by the program in FY2015:

- 17% completed all goals or had all identified family functioning areas addressed.
- 34% had full-time employment.
- 39% had permanent housing.
- 46% had completed an educational benchmark.

In addition, only 16% of the 98 young adults who were referred by OYE to the Collaboratives for pre-transition relationship-building were engaged.

Stakeholder Assessment of the Problem

In September 2015, a group of 12 internal and external stakeholders came together to assess aftercare programming against best practices in the field of youth/young adult engagement. The practices considered were drawn from the work of more than 23 leading organizations around the country that either directly operate, evaluate, or provide technical assistance on youth programming.¹⁸ Despite diverse locales and missions, these organizations rely on (or endorse) a consistent set of 10 core program characteristics and design elements, or “best practices.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Aspen Forum for Community Solutions/Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund; California Connected by 25; Annie E. Casey Foundation Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) Initiative and Adult Employment Initiative; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative; Center for Law and Social Policy Campaign for Youth/ Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth; Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; Child Trends; DC Alliance of Youth Advocates; Forum for Youth Investment/Collective Impact Forum; Foster Care to Success; FSG Social Impact Consultants/Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth; HHS Office of Planning research and Evaluation; Indiana Connected by 25; Iowa

The 12 CFSA stakeholders concluded that the aftercare program's struggles result, in large measure, from the fact that it is not following the field's best practices consistently. Moving forward from this assessment, a series of additional stakeholder groups explored in greater depth the reasons why, and what could be done about it.

A Call For A New Program Model

The discussion and input from these various groups produced a series of specific operational recommendations. Predominant among them was the strongly-held view that the current program model (1:1 case management) was out of alignment with best practices in the field and was directly linked to many of the program's struggles. It was therefore recommended that this model be replaced with the "positive youth development/youth partnership" model that is used by leading organizations in youth and young adult programming.

Further, because there are no jurisdictions in the country in which a public child welfare agency provides supportive programming for emancipated young adults ages 21-23, such a change would position the CFSA program for a leadership role in the field.

Positive Youth Development Theory and Application to CFSA

The casework model tends to involve a lot of one-on-one meetings with social workers taking the lead to solve problems, arrange for services, and intervene in difficult situations. This model may work for crisis intervention but it does not work well for building young adults' skills and capacity – and this is what they will ultimately need to successfully navigate the crises life is sure to continue throwing their way.

-- Youth Advocate

Aftercare Services Network; Jobs for America's Graduates Model; Jobs for the Future/Back on Track Model; MDRC; National Youth in Transition Database; Urban Institute; White House Council for Community Solutions; Young Women's Project; Youth Transition Funder Group/Foster Care Work Group; Youth Villages Life Set.

¹⁹ 10 best practices drawn from the work of 23 leading organizations:

1. Use a *Positive Youth Development* Framework
2. Build Relationships with Caring Adults and Communities
3. Start Early
4. Support a Highly-Effective Aftercare Workforce
5. Actively Collaborate with Many Community Partners
6. Actively Collaborate with other Government Agencies
7. Collect and Use a Broad Set of Data
8. Identify and Take-On Needed Policy Changes
9. Make Financial Education a Top Priority
10. Build Pathways to Employment

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach engages youth in ways that recognize, utilize, and enhance their strengths. It promotes positive outcomes by providing opportunities, fostering healthy relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on youths' leadership and strengths.

One way to understand the nuances of PYD as it is applied to youth programming is through the "SOS Framework" of services, opportunities and supports:

- **Services:** Actions done to or for youth intended to enhance health, safety, performance, and other forms of essential well-being and physiological functioning. These are the traditional intervention services most often provided by public systems. They are critical, but alone are inadequate for fostering well-being.
- **Opportunities:** These are actions by young people where youth become actors rather than recipients – either through work, service, or advanced learning. Although youth ideally encounter a diverse array of opportunities, those that are sustained and encourage youth to exercise meaningful decision-making roles ultimately foster the greatest number of personal competencies.
- **Supports:** Three types of tangible activities that are done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources. Emotional supports facilitate a sense of safety, nurturing and friendship. Motivational supports provide positive expectations, guidance and developmentally appropriate boundaries. Strategic supports facilitate access to needed resources and information.²⁰

Application of a PYD Framework for CFSA

To fully adopt a positive youth development approach, CFSA's aftercare program would have to meet the following criteria:

- Mission statements, outcomes and benchmarks, position descriptions, training material, supervision strategies and staff evaluation criteria reflect the objectives and principles of positive youth development.
- 1:1 "case management" is not the principal engagement strategy. While programs may retain traditional intake and case-assignment structures, their day-to-day work with young adults emphasizes strategies such as peer-based mentoring and learning, core

²⁰ Whitlock, J. (September, 2004). "Understanding Youth Development Principles and Practices." Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Family Life Development Center, ACT for Youth.

competency training, group work, team decision-making, virtual communities, and robust opportunities for employment, volunteering and leadership.

- Youth are participants and decision-makers in all aspects of program development and implementation and are trained for the active participation and partnership that is expected of them. Their participation is maintained through flexible scheduling, and provision of critical supportive resources such as child care and transportation subsidies.

Attachment D

Recommendations and Action Steps for Improving Current Aftercare Programming

Two focus groups of internal and external stakeholders developed the following recommendations and action steps for current-contract programming.

Recommendation #1: Develop resource information tool for program workers and participants (aligns with CRP²¹ recommendation #1).

CFSA Action Steps:

- A. Develop and maintain an **up-to-date**, comprehensive resource tool distributed/marketed to social workers and program participants:
 - Using the current procedural operations manual as basis, clarify what's available from CFSA.
 - What outside resources (e.g., Medicaid) are available?
 - How do you access these resources (what do youth need to do...what do workers need to do)?
 - Any limitations/restrictions
 - Contact information for questions
 - Live links

- B. Explore why the new transit money roll-out has not gone smoothly and what the fix is for next time.

Recommendation #2: Provide 1-2 additional training sessions for staff and program participants (aligns with CRP recommendation #7).

CFSA Action Steps:

- A. Design and implement one or two new, high-impact training sessions for social workers.
 - Priority topics:

²¹ As noted in the body of the document, the Citizens Review Panel is a federally mandated group of citizens who serve as an external, independent oversight body for the District's child welfare system. CRP evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of District government agencies involved in child protection as well as neighborhood-based services provided by organizations under contract with CFSA. For more information about the youth aging out of foster care work go to <http://www.dc-crp.org/projects.html>.

- Engaging difficult-to-reach young adults (including recognizing and effectively dealing with mental health issues; approaches to facilitating independence)
- Navigating relevant city systems
- Training strategies and considerations:
 - Use external expert(s)
 - Use Collaborative staff (peer-to-peer model)
 - City systems training could be workers and participants combined
 - Young adult-led or co-led
 - Partner agencies and other CBOs should come to CFSA to participate (consistent with improved approaches to referral/engagement)

- B. Design and implement one or two new, high-impact training sessions for program participants in areas of particular struggle:
- Workforce training
 - Relationship management/conflict resolution

Recommendation #3: Assess and make improvements to practice on referring program participants to supportive resources.

CFSA Action Steps:

- A. Review current policies and procedures.
- B. Articulate desired practices (taking into account different levels of participant functioning) and develop new policy.
- C. Provide training (see #2A).

Recommendation #4: Resolve identified customer service/intake concerns.

CFSA Action Steps:

- A. Help instigate (via deputy mayor?) city-wide/cross-agency consideration of “no wrong door” referral and connection protocols for young adults seeking supports.
- B. See Action 1A.
- C. Train reception/intake workers on new protocols, use of new resource guide and basic tenets of interfacing with young adults in distress.
- D. Monitor and support Collaboratives’ website and voice-mail improvement efforts.

Recommendation #5: Conduct caseload assessment across Collaboratives to

troubleshoot current over- and under-staffing concerns.

CFSA Action Steps:

- A. Centrally conduct an assessment of staffing data to assess nature and level of these issues and propose interim solutions.

Recommendation #6: Sponsor one or two young-adult-led gatherings about program benefits & opportunities (aligns with CRP recommendation #1).

CFSA Action Steps:

- A. Sponsor one or two young-adult-led gatherings about program benefits & opportunities.
- B. Explore the possibility of monthly drop-in sessions for young adults on core issues, with presentations by Collaborative staff and/or program alumni.
- C. See 1A and 4B: maintain up-to-date resource and information portal for young adults.

Recommendation #7: Support improved direct service performance with quarterly meetings for Collaboratives' providers (aligns with CRP recommendation #4).

CFSA Action Steps:

- A. Hold quarterly meetings for Collaboratives' direct service providers: for strategizing, networking, trouble-shooting, case consultation, resource-sharing.
- B. See Consortium on Child Welfare convenings as a possible model.

Attachment E

The Citizens Review Panel submitted 2013-2014 Recommendations of the Taskforce on Youth Aging Out as a result of a project to determine the needs of older and former foster youth and learn about their experiences transitioning out of the foster care system. The taskforce conducted focus groups with youth and social workers, as well as 23 The Collaboratives are community-based organizations that provide services and supports to at-risk children and families.

The Taskforce made the following recommendations, which were included in last year's annual report as the 2014 recommendations of the DC CRP:

1. CFSA and the Collaboratives should work together to ensure that all foster youth ages 15 to 21 are aware of the full range of transition and aftercare services available to them.
2. CFSA should review its referral process and ensure that all youth are referred to aftercare services at age 19.5, consistent with CFSA policy.
3. CFSA and the Collaboratives should clarify the role of Collaborative workers in the transition planning process for youth between the ages of 19 ½ and 21 and ensure that minimum contact requirements in CFSA/ Collaborative contracts are met.
4. CFSA and the Collaboratives should coordinate their employment-related programming, sharing contacts and replicating effective programming to ensure continuity of programming after a youth turns 21.
5. CFSA should review the approval process for Rapid Housing to ensure that youth receive timely approval and funding.
6. CFSA and the Collaboratives should jointly increase outreach to area landlords regarding the housing needs of former foster youth. CFSA and the Collaboratives should also research what child welfare systems in other jurisdictions are doing to address the housing needs of former foster youth.
7. CFSA and the Collaboratives should explore expanding programming to help former foster youth cope with emotionally difficult relationships.
8. CFSA and the Collaboratives should agree to a set of outcome data, including post-case closure data, to be collected for each youth aging out of foster care. The Agency and the Collaboratives should collect and analyze this data jointly to identify programming gaps and guide future programming changes.
9. CFSA and the Collaboratives should jointly set up a system for youth participating in the CFSA transition planning process and youth aftercare services to provide real-time feedback about their experiences, so that service gaps can be identified quickly, and programming adjusted as needed.

10. CFSA and the Collaboratives should have a standing Foster Care Alumni Review Board to both advise the Agency/Collaboratives regarding programming for older and former foster youth and provide peer support to foster youth in their last years before aging out.