

February 2017 Report

Task Force on
Youth Aging Out of Foster Care



Pursuant to House Concurrent Resolution 94
of the 2016 Regular Session
of the Louisiana Legislature

Executive Summary

House Concurrent Resolution (HCR) Number 94 of the 2016 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature, authored by Representative Billiot, continued the Task Force on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care created by HCR Number 168 and House Resolution (HR) 171 of the 2015 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature. The Task Force has been co-chaired by a designee of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers, Louisiana Chapter. According to HCR 94 and 168, the Task Force shall study and explore the public policy and financing options for programs that could assist youth aging out of foster care to achieve successful independence once they reach the age of majority. Additionally, HR 171 urged the Task Force to study and make recommendations concerning the problem of homelessness among persons who have aged out of foster care.

Membership

Council Member	Organization/Member Represented
Toni Buxton (Co-Chair)	Dept. of Children and Family Services, Secretary's Designee
Faith Boudreaux	Louisiana Department of Health (LDH), Secretary's Designee
The Honorable Paul Young	La. Council of Juv. & Family Court Judges, President's Designee
Joy Bruce	Louisiana Court Appointed Special Advocates
Laura Jensen	La. Assoc. of Children and Family Agencies, Exec. Dir. Designee
Carmen Weisner (Co-Chair)	National Assoc. of Social Workers, Louisiana Chapter, Exec. Dir.
Dylan Waguespack	Louisiana Progress, Member
Robert Tasman	Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops, Representative
Kathleen Richey	LouisianaChildren.org, President
Peggy Kirby	Louisiana Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, Executive Dir.
Claudia Berry	HP Serve, Executive Director
James Kelly	Covenant House – New Orleans, Executive Director
Bryan Moore	Louisiana Workforce Commission, Executive Director
Dianna Keller	State Superintendent of Education, Designee
Vacant position	La. Community & Tech. College System, President's Designee
Claire Norris	Louisiana Board of Regents, President's Designee
Angie Thomas	Chafee Foster Care Independence Prog. Provider Coalition, Rep.
Nicole Sweazy	Louisiana Housing Corporation, Executive Director Designee
Jarvis Spearman	Former Foster Care Youth
Sonya Brown	Former Foster Care Youth
James Gilmore	Children's Cabinet, Executive Director
Chaunda Mitchell	Office of Drug Policy, Office of the Governor, Director
Daphne Robinson	LDH, Office of Public Health, Maternal and Child Health, Rep.
Darrell Curtis	LDH, Bureau of Health Services Financing, Representative
Deborah Paul	La. Office of Student Financial Assistance, Exec. Dir. Designee
Dr. Scott Crain	Louisiana Superintendent Association, Representative

Summary of Findings

The DCFS, legislators, and advocates are aware of the need to provide youth who will exit foster care at age eighteen with opportunities to be meaningfully involved in a comprehensive transition planning process focused on the development of independent living skills in areas such as:

- Establishing safe, stable, and affordable housing;
- Accessing health insurance and healthcare services;
- Completing an educational/vocational training program;
- Pursuing employment opportunities; and,
- Creating healthy, permanent connections.

It is well known outcomes for youth who exit foster care without a permanent family are poor. At age 26, these youth experience more unemployment, lower incomes, more economic hardships, poorer health, and higher arrest rates than youth of the same age in the general population. There are many reasons why youth leaving foster care are unable to take over adult responsibilities:

- Incomplete brain development;
- Insufficient financial support;
- Inadequate cultural readiness;
- Unutilized self-sufficiency opportunities;
- Inaccurate assumptions;
- Inconsistent judicial oversight;
- Deficient resources; and,
- Unmet special needs.

Research has indicated there are six key variables/outcomes linked to youth success:

- Financial self-sufficiency;
- Educational attainment;
- Connections with competent and caring adults throughout the entire transition process;
- Reductions in experiences with homelessness;
- Prevention of high-risk behaviors; and,
- Access to health care and insurance.

There are five service components necessary to achieve the above positive outcomes for youth in or transitioning from foster care:

- Independent Living Skills Assessment and Training
- A Safe and Affordable Place to Live
- Case Management from Experienced and Uniquely Trained Staff
- Resources to Address Special Needs
- Aftercare Services.

Louisiana currently has several services in place to assist youth transitioning from foster care.

- Youth who have not completed their secondary education when they turn 18 yet will do so within one year and are performing successfully, are eligible for a stipend to offset their care needs while completing their high school diploma or HiSET.
- All youth who aged out of foster care are eligible for continued case management services through the contracted Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) from age 18 to 26.
- Louisiana utilizes Educational Training Vouchers (ETV) to provide \$5000 per academic year toward post-secondary educational/vocational training expenses until youth reach the age of 21, or 23 in some circumstances.
- Louisiana provides health care coverage to age 26 through Medicaid for all youth who exit foster care on their 18th birthday.
- DCFS provides for youth to complete driver's education classes.
- Transition planning begins at age 14 for youth who are in foster care.
- Annual credit clearances are completed on youth from ages 14 to 17, with DCFS assisting in rectifying any discrepancies.
- Louisiana provides youth in foster care free state identification.

Recommendations

The Task Force has developed the following recommendations:

- **Development of a One-Stop Transition Center for Foster Youth and Alumni:** This would centralize community resources and simplify communication and case coordination between youth, caretakers, and system professionals.
- **Automatic Medicaid Enrollment and Redetermination to Age 26:** Currently, youth have to correspond on an annual basis with LDH to maintain eligibility for Medicaid. If the process was automatic from age 18 to 26, more youth would maintain insurance coverage until age 26.
- **Financial Security:** Louisiana should create the capacity for banks to open savings accounts for youth in foster care with different legal conditions from the general population. Youth would then be allowed to open accounts without having an adult cosigner, increasing financial resources and their ability for self-support.
- **Specialized DCFS Staff:** Consultants who excel in working with the specialized needs of transitioning youth should be designated. These youth consultants should be trained and expected to have advanced knowledge on working with youth around issues such as establishing permanent connections, overcoming illegal or unhealthy substance use, addressing runaway behaviors, diminishing delinquent behavior, preventing sex or labor trafficking, expressing gender identity, understanding appropriate sexual expression, combatting bullying, etc.
- **Extended Foster Care:** Louisiana should extend foster care up to a youth's 21st birthday for those who achieve the age of majority in foster care. The process

should be automatic with complete foster care services until the youth or DCFS requests emancipation from foster care from the court.

- Fund Post-Secondary Education for Foster Youth: The 2006 LA R.S. 17:1687 provides for tuition and fee exemptions in LA post-secondary educational institutions for persons in foster care, who were in foster care in LA for any of the nine months of the 24 months immediately prior to the youth's 18th birthday. It is recommended this legislation be funded, and a party named as responsible for implementation and management of the allotted funds.

Concluding Statement

Louisiana has a responsibility to continue supporting vulnerable youth who age out of the foster care system. A consistent number of youth whose traumatic experiences, personal issues, and life situation has lead them to the end of foster care without a connection to a family or a place to live continues to exist. If Louisiana decides not to extend foster care to 21, then the service components mentioned above need to be in place for these youth to prevent homelessness and other negative life outcomes. The Task Force is committed to developing the system supports needed to meet the needs of these youth. The DCFS will continue efforts toward family reunification, relative placements, and adoption. However, experience shows these solutions are not always possible or sustainable, and it takes a community effort inclusive of government and non-government organizations to achieve a more stable future for these youth.

The Task Force is providing as an attachment a much more detailed document outlining the research and findings in relation to this summarized report. The document includes appendices with supporting documents and letters of support from community organizations.