

Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First): New Opportunities for Coordination to Help Prevent and End Family and Youth Homelessness

The intersections between involvement with the child welfare system and housing instability and homelessness is well documented for both families and youth and young adults. Families experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of family separation and placements in foster care, while families involved with the child welfare system face delayed reunification when facing homelessness. Youth with a history of child welfare involvement including prior placements in foster care are also more likely to experience homelessness and for longer periods of time.

- A Philadelphia, PA study of families found that mothers who experienced homelessness were 4 times more likely to be involved with the child welfare system compared to other low-income mothers, and more likely to have their children placed in out-of-home care.¹
- A Milwaukee, WI study found that families involved with the child welfare system who experienced homelessness in the year prior to their child being placed in out of home care had a 50% less chance of reunification than families without an episode of homelessness.²
- The National Youth in Transition Database surveys youth in foster care at age 17 and every 2 years post-exit from foster care until age 23; 43% of the 5,583 youth who completed all three waves of the National Youth in Transition Database survey reported having had a homeless experience by age 21 (at either age 17, 19, or 21)³
- The Voice of Youth Count, a national survey of unaccompanied youth ages 13 to 25 who have experienced some form of homelessness or housing instability found that nearly one third of the youth had experienced some form of involvement with the child welfare system in their lives.⁴

The Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) was signed into law on February 9, 2018. This legislation creates historic reforms that are a positive step forward to help children remain safely with their families and support youth on a successful transition to adulthood by restructuring the main federal funding stream for child welfare to expand and enhance prevention efforts. While additional child welfare reforms are needed, Family First includes long overdue changes to federal child welfare investments focused on prevention for children and youth at risk of foster care by giving states the flexibility to use funding previously limited to payments for foster care and adoption on time-limited prevention services. It also limits federal funds for congregate care placements, including group homes, shifting focus towards youth being placed in home-based settings. These new tools have the potential to: support local child welfare systems increased use of evidence-based interventions that contribute to family preservation and maintaining children and youth safely with their families, as well as strengthening supports for reunifications; promote and increase permanent families for older youth;

¹ Culhane, Jennifer F.; Webb, David; Grim, Susan; Metraux, Stephen; and Culhane, Dennis (2003) "Prevalence of Child Welfare Services Involvement among Homeless and Low-Income Mothers: A Five-year Birth Cohort Study," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 3 , Article 6. Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol30/iss3/6>

² Courtney, Mark E; McMurty, Steven L; Zinn, Andrew (2004) "Housing Problems Experienced by Recipients of Child Welfare Services" *Child Welfare: Arlington* Vol. 83, Iss. 5, 393-422.

³ Children's Bureau (2016). "NYTD Data Brief 5: Highlights from the NYTD Survey: Outcomes reported by young people at ages 17, 19, and 21 (Cohort 1)" found at: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/nytd_data_brief_5.pdf

⁴ Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago .http://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ChapinHall_VoYC_NationalReport_Final.pdf

support youth in extended foster care and those transitioning out of foster care; and help address opioid and other substance use challenges faced by vulnerable families involved with the child welfare system.

Homeless assistance providers often lack the expertise and funding and struggle with identifying providers of the much needed services to support families involved with, and youth transitioning out of the child welfare system that are being housed with homelessness assistance funds. Child welfare agencies are not always aware of the range of housing options that may be available in a community including housing assistance for families and youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness and may wait until a case is approaching closure before addressing housing needs. Child welfare funding for services to support youth transitioning out of foster care is also extremely limited, as is funding for targeted homeless assistance and housing resources for youth with prior foster care involvement. Family First provides opportunities to change the trajectory for child welfare involved children, youth and families including those experiencing housing instability and homelessness by providing state child welfare agencies with the option to use federal funding to provide services differently including provision of prevention and reunification services that, when matched with housing resources, can help achieve positive outcomes for families and youth engaged with both the homeless response and child welfare systems. When the two systems collaborate and leverage resources they have the potential to:

- Prevent and shorten time in out-of-home placements for children and youth,
- Increase access to and connect households with services that can help stabilize housing and exit homelessness,
- Strengthen family connections, and
- Improve education, employment, and well-being outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Summary of Changes under the Family First Prevention Services Act

The Family First Prevention Services Act amends Title IV-E and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act which governs federally funded child welfare activities across the country.⁵ The legislation also amends the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee), a federal grant given to states to serve youth who are transitioning out of foster care.

Major Changes to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act:

- Allows states to use Title IV-E funds, previously limited to expenditures associated with out-of-home placements and adoptions, on time-limited qualifying prevention services (substance abuse, mental health, and in-home parenting skills), with the goal of supporting the needs of families of children who, without these services, would likely require out-of-home placement.

Major Changes to Title IV-B of the Social Security Act:

- Updates the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program, a block grant program with the primary goal of preventing unnecessary separation and ensuring permanency through reunification, adoption or other arrangements, by removing time limits on reunification services and allowing for 15 months of aftercare services for reunified families.

⁵ Children's Bureau (2018). "Information Memorandum: New Legislation – Public Law 115-123, the Family First Prevention Services Act within Division E, Title VII of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018." Found at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im1802.pdf>

- Reauthorizes and updates the Regional Partnerships, targeted grants to increase the well-being of, and improve the permanency outcomes for, children affected by methamphetamine or other substance abuse. The updates to the grants better align with the new Title IV-E prevention services focus, including specifying mandatory partners, such as the public child welfare agency, appropriate courts and the state agency administering the substance abuse prevention and treatment block grant, as well as optional public and community based partners.

Major Changes to Chafee:

- Expands the eligible age from 21 years old to 23 years old for services authorized under Chafee and extends eligibility for employment and training vouchers for youth who have aged out of care to the age of 26.

Opportunities to Leverage the Family First Prevention Services Act to Prevent and End Family Homelessness

Planning for the implementation of the provisions under Family First provides new opportunities for child welfare agencies to engage affordable housing providers and the homeless response system to leverage each other's expertise and resources. These partnerships can lead to increased options for housing with supports for families involved with the child welfare system that are at-risk of or experiencing homelessness; and help the homeless response system and child welfare system more effectively serve a greater number of families to meet both their child welfare and housing goals. Below are suggested ways to leverage the new legislation to prevent and end family homelessness for families in the child welfare system:

1. **Match safe, affordable housing with newly allowable prevention services under Title IV-E funding and expanded prevention and reunification services under Title IV-B funding for families in the child welfare system at-risk of or experiencing homelessness.** Matching prevention and reunification services such as substance abuse services and in-home parenting supports with safe affordable housing can help prevent the need for out-of-home placements and sustain family reunifications while preventing or ending a family's experience of homelessness. These types of partnership have been particularly impactful when serving child welfare-involved families impacted substance abuse disorders. For example, CSH's Keeping Families Together is a supportive housing intervention that has been recognized as an effective response for child welfare-involved families impacted by substance abuse; the evaluation of a New York City pilot showed promising results with 90% of families remaining housed, 100% of families reunifying with their children, and 61% of the child welfare cases being closed within 10 months. ⁶ The ability to provide these services leverages new affordable housing opportunities. For example, providing substance abuse treatment in safe, supportive housing settings creates an opportunity to support families in rearing safety together by leveraging Family First with innovative forms of treatment such as recovery coaches and medication-assisted treatment. Family treatment courts, in which a judge convenes a multidisciplinary, collaborative team approach to serve families who require substance abuse treatment and who are involved with the child welfare system, can be leveraged to formally link housing, child welfare, treatment, and other services agencies.

⁶Swan-Jackson, R., Tapper, D., and Fields, A. (2010) "Keeping Families Together: An evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of a pilot supportive housing model for families involved in the child welfare system". Metis Associates.

- 2. Promote housing partnerships in State Child and Family Services Plans to leverage and enhance Family First services.** States can embed child welfare and housing partnerships in State Child and Family Services Plans by describing implementation plans that include housing resources and the homeless response system as key partners for responding to the needs of child welfare-involved families and youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness in State Child and Family Services Plans. These plans outline evidence-based interventions that will be used under Family First; recognizing the importance of housing as a platform from which to deliver successful services in these state plans will help emphasize its importance with local child welfare leaders responsible for implementing the provisions of Family First. These plans can leverage other recent federal legislation, such as the Child Abuse and Treatment Act, which requires the development of plans of safe care for newborns prenatally exposed to harmful substances, which can include housing linked with supportive services.
- 3. Promote the opportunity for housing providers and homeless response system partners to be included as a part of the teams receiving re-authorized and updated Regional Partnership grants under Title IV-B.** Including housing providers and homeless system response partners in the Regional Partnership Grant (RPG) program aligns with the program goal of helping states, tribes, and communities across the nation develop regional partnerships to provide, through interagency collaboration and integration, programs and services that increase permanency, safety and well-being outcomes of children who are in an out-of-home placement or are at risk of out-of-home placement as a result of a parental substance use. A supportive housing approach aligns with the RPG which focuses on addressing common systemic and practice challenges that are barriers to optimal family outcomes, including engagement of parents in substance use treatment; differences in system paradigms and training; conflicting timeframes across the systems; and service shortages in child welfare services and substance use treatment systems.

Opportunities to Leverage the Family First Prevention Services Act to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness

The Family First Prevention Services Act was enacted at a pivotal time in our nation's response to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Beginning in Fiscal Year 2017, Congress has appropriated funding on an annual basis for the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) homelessness assistance grants, and HUD has required applicants to partner with their local child welfare agencies. Communities across the country are working to implement coordinated community responses to youth homelessness and this legislation, along with resources being made available through extended foster care, can offer critical tools that will prevent and end homelessness for young people across the country. Below are suggested ways to leverage Family First and extended foster care resources to prevent and end youth homelessness:

- 1. Match safe, affordable housing with the newly allowable prevention services under Title IV-E funding and expanded prevention and reunification services under Title IV-B funding for pregnant and parenting youth in the child welfare system at-risk-of or experiencing homelessness.** Pregnant and parenting youth involved with the child welfare system can be at greater risk of experiencing homelessness when they exit foster care. Connections to stable housing with these expanded prevention

services under Family First, including mental health and substance abuse treatment, and in-home family strengthening programs, can help to reduce the risk of future homelessness and minimize the likelihood of future involvement with the child welfare system, including family separation. The ability to provide these services leverages new affordable housing opportunities.

2. **Utilize the newly allowable prevention services under Title IV-E funding and expanded prevention and reunification services under Title IV-B funding to support youth to remain safely and stably housed with family and/or guardians as they transition to adulthood.** Youth who have been reunified, adopted, or placed into a guardianship can still be at high risk of experiencing homelessness as they transition to adulthood, and some families struggle to continue to support youth beyond the age of 18. As states and counties implement these new and expanded supports, they should ensure the resources can also be accessed by older youth, and the families and guardians caring for them, to help them remain stably housed and prevent them from experiencing homelessness.
3. **Form partnerships between the child welfare system, affordable housing providers, and the homeless response system to use expanded Chafee eligibility and extended foster care resources to expand housing with supports for youth transitioning out of the foster care system who are at-risk-of or experiencing homelessness.** Chafee support services, along with extended foster care supports, can be matched with affordable housing resources to ensure youth remain stably housed and supported while finishing higher education, establishing sustainable employment, and moving to self-sufficiency. Expanded Chafee eligibility also allows for child welfare agencies to offer transition services to youth exiting extended foster care, as well as those exiting foster care at age 18 who choose not to enter extended care. Up to 30% of the state's Chafee grant can be used as direct assistance for housing, which can include stipends to be used to help pay rent in the private market, support to live with a friend or relative, or independent living programs similar to transitional housing. Extended foster care funding can also be used to support these different housing options. Communities should ensure they are leveraging all funding sources to create the housing with supports that will assist youth formerly in foster care successfully transition to adulthood.
4. **Build and work to sustain partnerships between the child welfare system and homeless response system to transfer best practices in youth housing programs from the homeless response system to those administered and/or funded by the child welfare system.** The homeless response system can offer their expertise in ensuring that independent living programs funded by Chafee practice Housing First principles and are focused on preventing and quickly ending youth homelessness. The homeless response system can also partner with the child welfare agency to identify and engage private landlords and other housing providers who are willing to work together to serve youth transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood who are at-risk-of experiencing homelessness, ensuring a broader array of housing options for youth currently and formerly in foster care.

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