

Template Letter to State Leaders to Advocate for Policy Reforms for Older Youth In Response to COVID-19

Explanation and purpose: Below is a template letter that can help structure the requests of advocates for state based reforms. This template is meant to be used with the **State Based Policy Reform Document** that provides a running list of reforms proposed across the country related to older youth. This list is based on the excellent work and thoughts of many colleagues across the country, including the leadership of the Foster Care Alumni of America. This template could be revised to direct your requests at the Governor, the state or local child welfare agency director, or to the state legislature.

TEMPLATE LETTER

Dear [Governor, State Child Welfare Director, Legislators **[REDACTED]**],

We recognize the challenges COVID-19 has placed on you and your administration and appreciate your leadership in this time of crisis. We write to ask that you take action to meet the health and safety needs of older youth in the child welfare system and youth who are aging out. During a time when many youth are able to rely on their families for critical support, youth in foster care must rely on the child welfare system to ensure their safety, health, and well-being. Your action is needed to ensure that the needs of these young people are met.

Youth leaving the care of the child welfare system in [STATE] between the ages of 18-21 are among the most vulnerable in our state and that vulnerability has significantly increased during the current public health crisis. In [State], on average _____ young people annually leave the child welfare system without reunification, adoption or guardianship.¹ They are on their own. Youth who have aged out of care recently and who will leave the system during the COVID-19 crisis are already at a high risk for homelessness, lack of income, instability and illness. The state stepped in and took custody of these youth because of abuse or neglect, and now the state needs to provide stability to these young people during a time of crisis when it is clear that they require more not less support from the child welfare agency.

Below are the **actions** **[SELECT FROM OLDER YOUTH STATE BASED POLICY REFORMS DOCUMENT]** we request that your administration take to promote the health, safety, and well-being of older youth in and from foster care during the COVID-19 crisis. Our main priority at this time must be to keep young people safe, housed and connected to services and caring adults so that they are able to make a successful transition to adulthood. The actions below will help ensure that we achieve these goals.

1. Suspend any requirements for extended care related to participation in school, higher education and training, program participation, and treatment.

Extended foster care is a lifeline for young people at this time. For many, however, activities that are crucial to remaining eligible for extended care, such as work, school, and programs, have been cancelled or eliminated. To ensure the safety of youth, the requirements for participation in school, work and formal programming under the [State Law] should be suspended during the crisis.

- 2. Place a moratorium on discharging any youth from extended foster care during this crisis and grant funding to counties so they can provide up to 6 months of continued placement and casework services for youth who would have discharged during the crisis or within 6 months of the crisis ending.**

Cutting young people off from their main source of support and stability during or soon after a health crisis will result in harm to youth. Young people who do not have the support of family will have an extraordinarily difficult time being able to meet their needs if they are discharged from care during this crisis. Their chance of generating a family-sustaining wage and maintaining safe housing will be almost impossible during this time. Without the safety net of family, these youth will be at great risk of harm, housing insecurity and illness.

- 3. Require county child welfare agencies to provide expedited processes for youth to re-enter care that allow their immediate needs to be met.**

Re-entry into care is a crucial safety net available to youth who aged out of care and are under age 21. Re-entry is an important mechanism for responding to the immediate needs of youth in crisis who may be on their own and no longer able to sustain their employment or education. The closure of most courts and many child welfare agencies make re-entry unavailable or unnecessarily difficult for young people in need. Child welfare agencies must develop a process to respond to these cases and provide placement and services to youth immediately so that their time in unsafe situations can be reduced. An expedited process could include using Voluntary Placement Agreements (VPAs), which do not require immediate court authorization as well as establishing presumptive eligibility for re-entry to care based solely on the youth's date of discharge.

- 4. Grant county child welfare agencies access to additional funds to provide housing and other supports for youth in foster care who are in college and were displaced.**

[State] has made great strides to support young people in foster care with access to higher education. Many of these youth have had their educational experience disrupted and county agencies are challenged to find alternative living arrangements as well as supports to ensure youth can continue their education. Additional funding to support housing placements and grants for foster youth in college will ensure that youth are able to continue their studies safely.

- 5. Provide additional funds to child welfare agencies to increase the Chafee Aftercare funds available to support youth who have aged out to meet their immediate basic needs during the crisis.**

Like many [people in your state] young adults who have left foster care, are now struggling to make ends meet in this time of health and economic crisis. However, as young people with less family and adult support, there are fewer social networks and resources that young people who aged out of foster care can rely on. Some youth may not have a bank account, credit history or savings. Our capacity to get funds to youth quickly and provide them case management and connection with services is vital. It will be lifesaving if we can increase the capacity of child welfare agencies to outreach to more young people who are on their own and respond to their needs by augmenting Chafee funds, which can serve youth up to age 23.

6. Provide additional funds to child welfare agencies to increase the number of family based settings and appropriate living arrangements for older youth.

The importance of having family and supportive adult connections to the health and well-being of young people cannot be more clear in this time of global crisis. Child welfare agencies must increase their capacity to connect older youth with family and kin so they are not alone and without support in times of crisis. The state can take immediate action to support county child welfare agencies to increase their ability to support caregivers for older youth and provide the staff support to make those settings long-lasting.

7. Direct child welfare agencies to plan with young people in foster care to ensure they are connected to vital resources, people, and assistance in this time of crisis.

Many older youth in foster care feel alone and isolated, lacking critical family and community ties. The COVID-19 crisis has increased this isolation and it is acute for older youth who may be living on their own. If in-person visits with family and agency workers are suspended, child welfare agencies should increase the frequency of virtual visitation with family and virtual check-ins with caseworkers. Agencies must develop plans that are responsive to the youth's current housing, education, employment, health, and well-being needs. Plans should also include assurances that all youth have access to both internet and smartphones and/or computers, to allow for contact with agency personnel and service providers, telemedicine, educational programming, employment, food, and family and social connections.

¹ To find data for your state on older youth and youth aging out, check out these two sources: 1. [State Fact Sheets on Older Youth in Foster Care](#) and 2. Kids Count Data Center, Safety and Risky Behaviors, Out of Home Placement Section.