



April 16, 2020

Dear Governor Wolf,

We are the Pennsylvania Chapter of the Foster Care Alumni of America. We write to ask that you take action to meet the health and safety needs of older youth in the foster care 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. We recognize the challenges COVID-19 has placed on you and your administration and appreciate your leadership in this time of crisis. 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 Pennsylvania 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 Pennsylvania, on average 700 young people annually leave the child welfare system without reunification, adoption or guardianship. They are on their own. Youth who have aged out of care recently and will leave the system during the COVID-19 crisis are 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 we request that your administration take to promote the health, safety, and well-being of older youth in 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. We hope you will follow the actions of the Governors of California, Illinois, Rhode Island and taken in the District of Columbia to help older youth in foster care. Young people in Alaska, Indiana, and several other states are making similar requests.

1. Suspend any requirements for extended care related to participation in school, higher education and training, program participation, and treatment during the period of the health crisis.

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 Juvenile Act should be suspended during the crisis.

- 2. Place a moratorium on discharging any youth from extended foster care if they would like continued services during the period of the COVID-19 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, or resumption of jurisdiction, 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 for young people in need. 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. County 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.

- 4. 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 Pennsylvanians, young adults who have left foster care, are now struggling to make ends meet. However, for young people with less family and adult support, there are fewer social networks and resources they can rely on. It will be lifesaving if we can increase counties capacity 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.

- 5. 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.

6. 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.

7. Direct child welfare agencies to do well-being checks and emergency planning with young people who have recently aged out of care and are still eligible for Chafee services.

Many young people who have recently aged out are in great need of assistance and support and likely do not have many people to turn to. Those who recently aged out may still be working to find stability and ways to make ends meet. The current health crisis has hit them hard at a time when they already may be struggling. Well-being checks and assistance in planning to meet basic needs and accessing resources will help ensure the safety and health of these young adults who are still eligible for Chafee services.

Sincerely,

*Foster Care Alumni of America—PA Chapter
Constance Iannetta, Chapter Chair*

The Following Organizations and Individuals Join PA-FCAA in This Request:

Organizations

Brandon's Forever Home

CASA of Philadelphia County

Community Legal Services
Defender Association of Philadelphia, Child
Advocacy Unit
Delta Family Services
Disability Rights Pennsylvania
Eddie's House
Education Law Center
Friends & Neighbors of Pennsylvania, Inc.
Homeless Advocacy Project
Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation
Juvenile Law Center
Kutztown University
PA Family Support Alliance

Penn State Abington
Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers'
Association
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
Pennsylvania State Resource Family
Association
Public Citizens for Children and Youth
Support Center for Child Advocates
The Center for Children's Justice (C4CJ)
The Field Center for Children's Policy,
Practice & Research at the University of
Pennsylvania
Turning Points for Children
Youth Fostering Change

Individuals and Advocates

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Kaitlyn Arrow
Nadine Atkinson-Flowers
Susan Badeau, Trainer and Consultant
Sarahanne Beegle, Speech-Language
Pathologist
Michael Bell, School-Family Liaison
Jennifer Bellot, CASA Volunteer
Lindsey Beugoms
Kelly Bickel
Steven Biondolillo
Andrea Boffice, Youth Advocate

Roslyn Brinkley, CASA Volunteer and
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Kirstin Brown
Jessica Chan, CASA Volunteer
Mark Cohen, CASA Volunteer
Mike Coleman, Realtor
Allen Rand Coleman, PhD, Clinical
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Tamra Dann
Kate Field, Advocate
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Lisa Fritz, Social Worker
Karen Galbraith
Glynnis Gradwell, Adoptive Grandmother
Jessica Griffin
Alexandra Gruber
Chad Nico Hiu
Brittany Hope
Kevin Houston
Patrick Houston, Climate & Inequality
Campaigns Organizer
Lewis Houston
Mauricette Houston, Mother
Charlene Houston, Realtor
Maria Houston
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Lisa Kennedy, Family Peer Support Specialist
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Trish Kinkle, CASA Program Director
Joe Kloss, System of Care Project Director
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Jamie Malloy
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Debra Stewart, Volunteer
Hao-Li Tai, CASA Volunteer
Diane Taitt
Saya Taniguchi
Lynna Thomas, College Counselor
Lorenzo Thomas
Tarah Toohil, PA State Representative
Anne Umbrecht, CASA Education Decision
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Brooke Williams

Catharine Williams, CASA Volunteer

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Joe Kloss, System of Care Project Director

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