



Improvements in Independent Living Services Will Better Assist State's Struggling Youth

at a glance

Youth in foster care have poor academic outcomes compared to non-foster youth, due in part to their lack of school permanency, disabilities, disciplinary problems, and homelessness. In addition, former foster youth often struggle with self-sufficiency after leaving the foster care system.

To address this problem, the Legislature expanded services to assist former foster youth and created three funding sources to financially assist these youths' transition to adulthood. However, relatively few youth receive aid—in Fiscal Year 2003-04, slightly more than a quarter (28%) of potentially eligible former foster youth received financial assistance through the program. There is no data on whether the remaining youth qualified for or desired assistance, as the Department of Children and Families does not have a method to track these youth. The department has recommended to its community-based providers not to keep "waiting list" data pending formal rule promulgation.

The department should improve its oversight of community-based care providers by requiring contracts to meet minimum performance standards, and it should revise its contract monitoring to reflect programmatic improvement rather than contract compliance.

Scope

This is the second of two reports examining the Independent Living Transition Services Program within the Department of Children and Families.¹ The program provides services to help foster youth transition from state-sponsored care to living independently as productive citizens. The program also offers financial assistance to former foster youth to pay for educational and living expenses. The Department of Children and Families contracts with private providers for independent living services, and the department is responsible for overseeing these providers. Our report addresses three questions.

- What are the education and employment outcomes of foster youth?
- To what extent are former foster youth receiving financial assistance through the program?
- Is the department adequately monitoring the delivery of contracted independent living services?

¹ Our first report identified recommended minimum system standards in providing foster youth with independent living services. *Independent Living Minimum Standards Recommended for Children in Foster Care*. OPPAGA [Report No. 04-78](#), November 2004.

Background

Approximately 17,705 youth in Florida lived in foster homes during Fiscal Year 2004-05. While most stay in foster care for relatively short time periods, many remain in state care until they reach adulthood. Long stays in foster care can hinder a youth's subsequent transition to adulthood, as most young adults learn the skills needed to live independently while they are growing up in their families. As foster youth are often raised in successive foster and group homes, they may not learn these critical skills before they reach the age of 18 and their traditional foster care services end.

To improve the success of foster youth, Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Public Law 106-169), which provides funding to states to improve services and expand eligibility for independent living services. Foster youth up to age 18 and former foster youth up to age 23 are eligible for services.

During August 2005, Florida's Independent Living Transition Services Program served 7,627 foster youth between the ages of 13 and 17 inclusive, all of whom were required to receive pre-independent living services. The program also provided aftercare and transition services to 1,929 former foster youth aged 22 and younger.

Pursuant to s. 409.1451, *Florida Statutes*, program services are provided by community-based care providers. As shown in Exhibit 1, these community-based providers must offer current and former foster youth a continuum of independent living services and financial assistance.

For Fiscal Year 2005-06, the department has allocated \$18.3 million to the Independent Living Transition Services Program. This amount comprises a \$8.9 million federal grant from the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, \$3.2 million in federal Education and Training Voucher (ETV) grant funding, and \$6.2 million in general revenue, not including the general revenue used to match the federal dollars.

Findings

Foster youth tend to have poor academic outcomes due in part to their lack of school permanency, disabilities, disciplinary problems, and homelessness. In addition, former foster youth, compared to the same-age population, often struggle with self-sufficiency upon leaving the foster care system.

While the department allocated \$20 million the past two fiscal years to assist former foster youth, most potentially eligible youth did not receive independent living financial assistance.

Current department contracts do not specifically require community providers to meet minimum performance standards for the independent living program. In addition, the current standards do not assess program quality, and the department's sampling methods result in inadequate oversight.

What are the educational and employment outcomes of foster care youth?

Compared to other youth in their age group, foster youth typically perform poorly in school, are at higher risk of unemployment, have long-term dependency on public assistance, and have increased rates of incarceration. We assessed the educational and employment outcomes of all 9,003 current and former foster youth between the ages of 13 and 22, as of June 30, 2004. We compared these youth to the general population on a variety of academic and earnings outcomes. See Appendix A for a more detailed discussion of our methodology.

Exhibit 1

Community-Based Providers Must Offer a Continuum of Independent Living Transition Services to Foster Youth

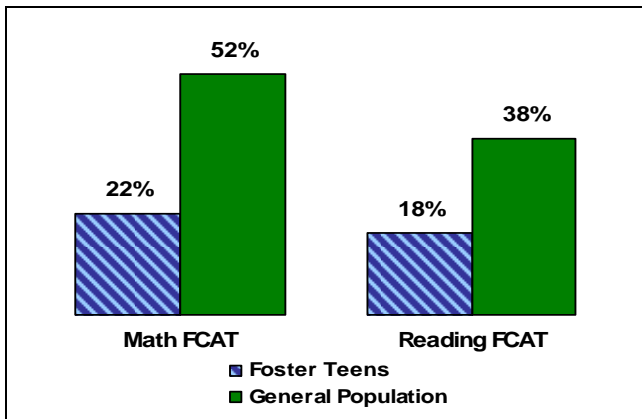
Service	Eligibility	Description
Pre-independent living services	All 13-14-year-olds in foster care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Life skills training ▪ Educational field trips ▪ Conferences
Life skills services	All 15-17-year-olds in foster care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Banking and budgeting skills ▪ Interviewing skills ▪ Parenting skills ▪ Educational support ▪ Employment training ▪ Counseling
Subsidized independent living services	Some 16-and 17-year-olds chosen by the department as being able to demonstrate independent living skills.	Arrangements that allow a child to live independently of the daily care and supervision of an adult.
Aftercare support services	Youth, ages 18-22, inclusively, who have been in foster care, meet certain conditions, and are determined eligible by the department. Temporary assistance provided to prevent homelessness. The amount provided is based on funds available.	<p>Services to assist young adults who were formerly in foster care to continue to develop the skills and abilities necessary for independent living.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mentoring and tutoring ▪ Mental health services and substance abuse counseling ▪ Life skills classes, including credit management and preventative health activities ▪ Parenting classes ▪ Job skills training ▪ Counselor consultations ▪ Temporary financial assistance
Road to Independence Scholarship	<p>Youth, ages 18-20-years-old (initial award) Under 23 (renewal awards)</p> <p>Must meet one of the following criteria: (1) earned a high school diploma or its equivalent and has been admitted for full-time enrollment in an eligible postsecondary education institution; (2) enrolled full time in an accredited high school; (3) enrolled full-time in an accredited adult education program designed to provide the student with a high school diploma or its equivalent.</p>	<p>Financial assistance to help former foster children to receive the educational and vocational training needed to achieve independence.</p> <p>Amount of award based on the living and educational needs of the young adult and may be up to, but shall not exceed, the amount of earnings that the student would have been eligible to earn working a 40-hour-a-week federal minimum wage job.</p>
Transitional support services	Youth ages 18-22, inclusively, who have been in foster care and that demonstrate that the services are critical to the young adult's own efforts to develop a personal support system and achieve self-sufficiency.	<p>Other appropriate short-term services, which may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Financial ▪ Housing ▪ Counseling ▪ Employment ▪ Education ▪ Mental health ▪ Disability ▪ Other services, if the young adult demonstrates that the services are "critical" to achieve self-sufficiency

Source: Section 409.1451, *Florida Statutes*.

Lack of school permanency, disabilities, disciplinary problems, and homelessness contributed to poor academic outcomes for foster youth

For the 2003-04 academic year, Florida’s foster youth had poorer educational outcomes than non-foster youth in their age group. As shown in Exhibit 2, foster youth scored substantially lower on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT), with less than a quarter performing at grade level in math and reading.

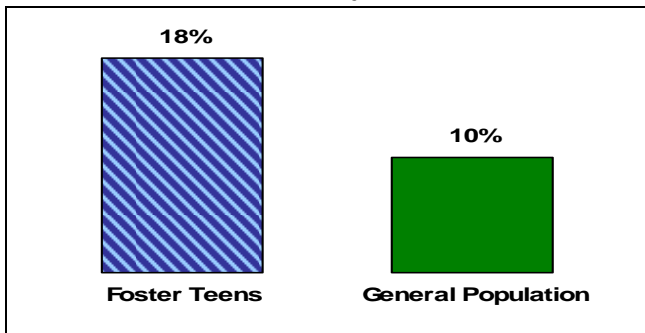
Exhibit 2
A Smaller Percentage of Foster Teens Scored at Grade Level on Their FCAT Exams



Source: Databases maintained by the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education for foster youth age 13-17, inclusive, and same-age students enrolled in Florida schools as of June 30, 2004.

Exhibit 3 shows that foster youth were nearly twice as likely to be held back a grade than non-foster youth.

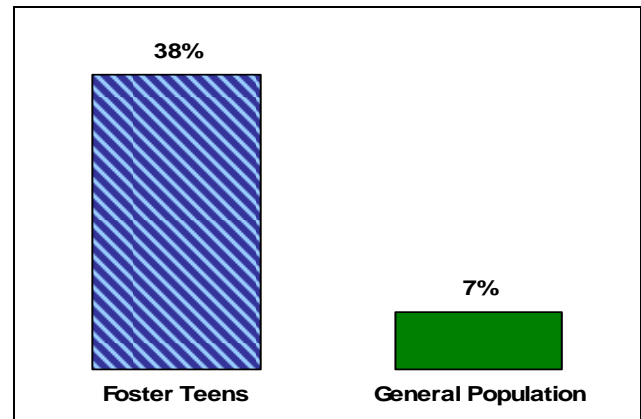
Exhibit 3
Foster Teens Were More Likely to Be Held Back a Grade



Source: Databases maintained by the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education for foster youth age 13-17, inclusive, and same-age students enrolled in Florida schools as of June 30, 2004.

Several factors likely contributed to the low educational achievement of foster youth. Many foster youth move from one foster family to another, which disrupts their schooling. National research has shown that school permanency is strongly associated with school performance. Changing schools compromises the continuity and pacing that occurs when a youth remains in the same school. As shown in Exhibit 4, foster youth in our sample were five times more likely than non-foster youth to change schools. In the 2003-04 school year, 38% of the foster youth changed schools at least once, compared to only 7% of the general population.

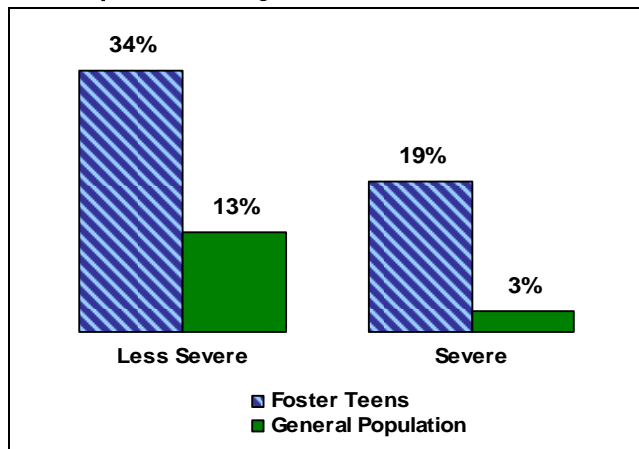
Exhibit 4
Foster Teens Are More Likely to Change Schools



Source: Databases maintained by the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education for foster youth age 13-17, inclusive, and same-age students enrolled in Florida schools as of June 30, 2004.

Foster youth disproportionately had disabilities that hampered their learning. As shown in Exhibit 5, foster youth were two-and-a-half times more likely to have been diagnosed with a “less severe” learning disability, such as a hearing, speech, or visual impairment, and seven times more likely to have been diagnosed with a “severe” disability, such as being educably mentally disabled or severely brain injured.

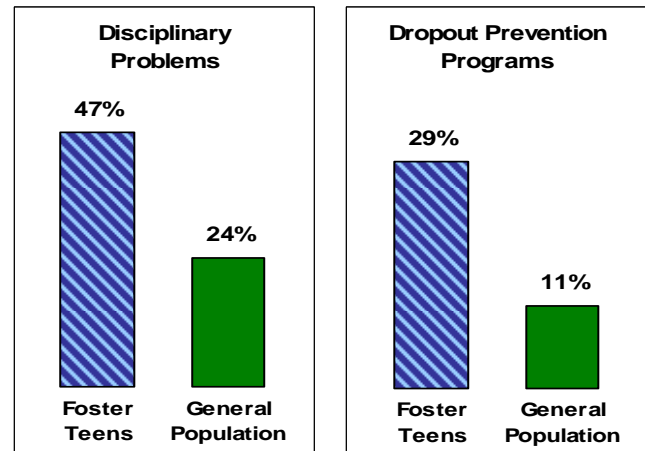
**Exhibit 5
Foster Teens Are More Likely to Have Disabilities That Impede Learning**



Source: Databases maintained by the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education for foster youth age 13-17, inclusive, and same-age students enrolled in Florida schools as of June 30, 2004.

Foster youth also experienced higher rates of school disciplinary problems that qualified them for dropout prevention programs than did non-foster youth. As shown in Exhibit 6, foster youth were twice as likely to have school disciplinary problems. These disciplinary problems ranged from being suspended, to being placed in an alternative school, to being expelled. Foster youth were also almost three times more likely to be involved in dropout prevention programs for youth who were already parents, were under supervision of the Department of Juvenile Justice, or were deemed unmotivated or unruly in the classroom.

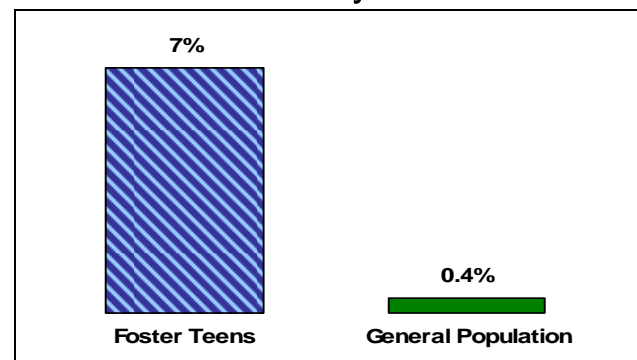
**Exhibit 6
Foster Teens Are More Likely to Have Disciplinary Problems and to Be in Dropout Prevention Programs**



Source: Databases maintained by the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education for foster youth age 13-17, inclusive, and same-age students enrolled in Florida schools as of June 30, 2004.

Finally, foster youth had higher rates of homelessness, which may have contributed to low academic achievement. Youth were considered homeless when they lived on the streets, in a shelter, or with a friend at any time during the school year. As shown in Exhibit 7, foster youth were 17 times more likely to be homeless than were non-foster youth their same age. As noted by published studies, academic achievement is compromised when youth are homeless.

**Exhibit 7
Foster Teens Are More Likely to Be Homeless**

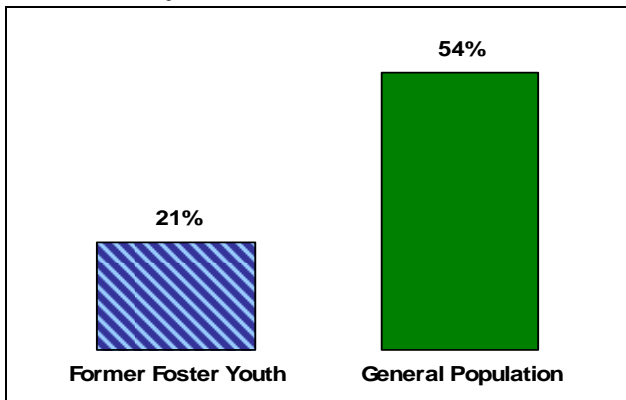


Source: Databases maintained by the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education for foster youth age 13-17, inclusive, and same-age students enrolled in Florida schools as of June 30, 2004.

Young adults leaving the foster care system struggle with self-sufficiency

Foster youth also tended to have poorer outcomes once they reached adulthood compared to the same-age general population. As shown in Exhibit 8, former foster youth, 18 and older, were less likely to attend vocational schools, community, or four-year colleges after leaving high school. Overall, one in five foster youth continued their education, compared to over half of those in the same-aged general population.²

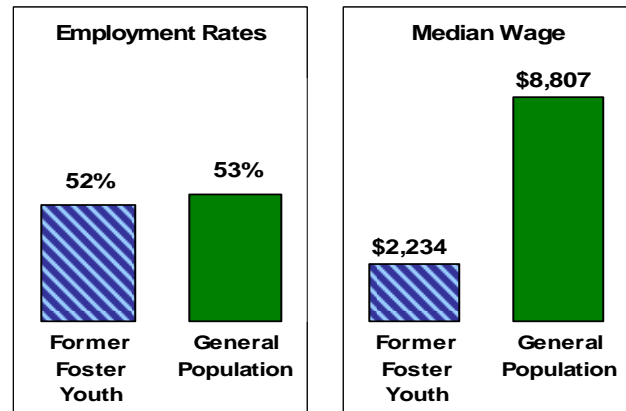
Exhibit 8 Former Foster Youth Are Less Likely to Attend Postsecondary Schools



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Children and Families data, Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) data as of June 30, 2004, and data from FETPIP annual outcome reports.

Former foster youth also had lower employment success. As shown in Exhibit 9, both groups were employed at the same rate, but those who had been in foster care typically earned only one-fourth the median wage of the same-age population. The average annual earnings of former foster youth were \$2,500, compared to \$8,807 of the same-age general population.

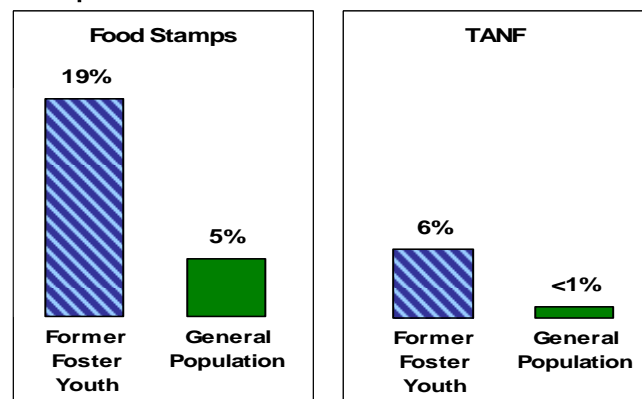
Exhibit 9 Although Employed at Comparable Rates, Former Foster Youth Earn Less



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Children and Families data, Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) data as of June 30, 2004, and data from FETPIP annual outcome reports.

Consistent with their low wages, former foster youth also were more likely to receive public assistance. As shown in Exhibit 10, these youth were four times more likely to receive food stamps and nine times more likely to receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).³ Receipt of TANF monies was significant as it indicates many former foster youth were already parents prior to their 23rd birthday.

Exhibit 10 Former Foster Youth Are More Likely to Receive Food Stamps and TANF



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Children and Families data, Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) data as of June 30, 2004, and data from FETPIP annual outcome reports.

² We based our examination on the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) data. Additional explanation is provided in Appendix A.

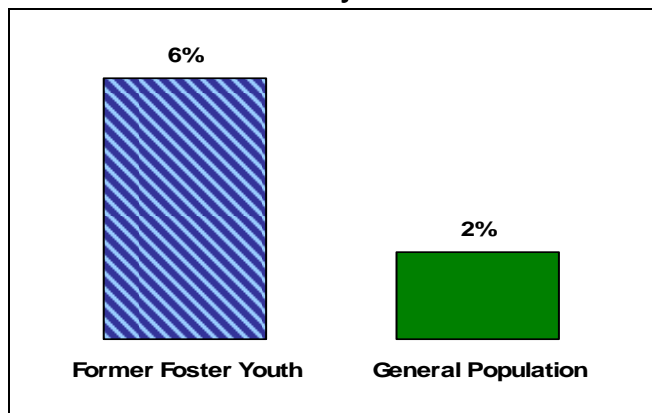
³ TANF is time-limited public assistance payments made to poor families, based on Title IV-A of the Social Security Act. The program provides parents with job preparation, work, and support services to help them become self-sufficient.

One factor that may contribute to the relatively poor employment outcomes for foster youth is that the community-based providers are offering only limited job placement services to their clients. Our January 2005 survey of 12 community-based care providers found that while nearly all the agencies provided foster youth with training on job search techniques, such as resumé writing and interviewing skills, only half were helping these youth find part-time jobs. Further, only 4 of the 12 had developed partnerships with employment programs and local industries in order to provide youth with such opportunities as job shadowing, job mentoring, or internships. Providing a higher level of these job readiness services could help these youth find better, higher-paying jobs upon leaving the foster care system.

Compared to youth their same age, former foster youth had higher rates of involvement in the criminal justice system

The higher rate of disciplinary problems that foster youth experienced while in school extended to their early adult years as well. Former foster youth were three times more likely to be in prison or on probation than the same-age population, as shown in Exhibit 11.

**Exhibit 11
Former Foster Youth Are More Likely to Be in the Criminal Justice System**



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Children and Families data, Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) data as of June 30, 2004, and data from FETPIP annual outcome reports.

The recent expansion of the independent living program may improve future results. Although independent living services have been authorized since 1999, most program activities began in 2002

when the program was expanded and shifted from the department to private providers. As a result, most independent living programs that served the children we examined had been providing services less than three years. Similarly, financial assistance, in the form of the Road to Independence Scholarship, has only been offered since late 2002, which would have had only minimal impact on the foster youth outcomes we examined.

Are former foster care youth receiving financial assistance as intended by the Legislature?

Financial self-sufficiency is challenging for many young adults who age out of the foster care system. While in foster care, the state and foster parents manage youths’ expenses until their 18th birthday. However, upon reaching adulthood, youth leave foster care and become responsible for managing their own expenses and supporting themselves.

To financially assist former foster youth, the Legislature established three funding sources.

The *Road-to-Independence Scholarship* is intended to help former foster youth receive educational and vocational training needed to achieve independence. Since former foster youth are exempt from paying in-state tuition at state schools, the scholarship primarily helps youth with living expenses such as rent and utility bills. Young adults finishing high school or enrolled in adult education programs are also eligible for this assistance. Florida law provides that youth can receive up to \$10,704 per year, which is the largest source of financial assistance for youth.⁴

Former foster youth may receive *transition funding* of up to \$5,000 a year until age 23 to help achieve self-sufficiency. For example, a youth may receive transition funds for job training expenses.

Youth may receive emergency *aftercare funding* of up to \$1,000 per year until age 23, particularly to prevent homelessness.

Foster youth enroll for the Road-to-Independence Scholarship with assistance from community-

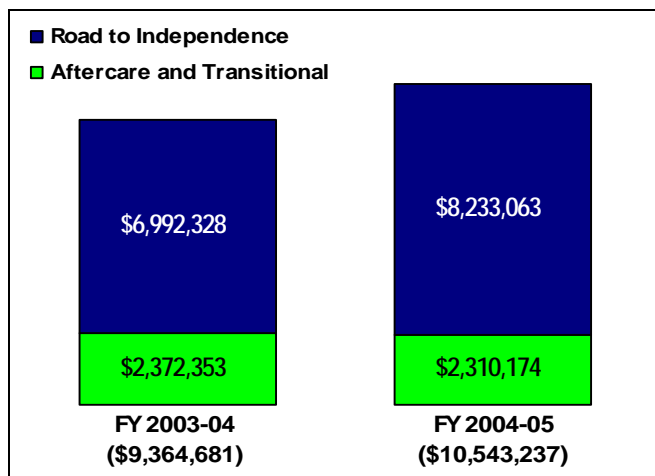
⁴ This award was determined based on the amount a youth could earn working a 40-hour-a-week job at the federal minimum wage.

based care providers, who also may award youth transition and emergency aftercare awards based on evidence of need, such as an eviction notice or past due utility bill.

Few potentially eligible youth received financial assistance

Over the last two fiscal years, the department and private providers have disbursed approximately \$20 million to assist former foster youth. As shown in Exhibit 12, providers disbursed most of these funds in the form of Road to Independence Scholarships.

**Exhibit 12
Providers Have Disbursed Millions in Financial Assistance Over the Last Two Fiscal Years**



Note: These figures do not include Federal Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funds.

Source: Department of Children and Families’ Budget Office.

However, relatively few potentially eligible youth have received this assistance. For instance, 28% of the target population of former foster youth 18-22 years old received financial assistance from the program during Fiscal Year 2003-04, as shown in Exhibit 13. The median amount received per youth was \$7,609. The median Road-to-Independence Scholarship was \$7,267, while the median transition award was \$1,975, and the median aftercare award was \$1,200.

There is no data available on what percentage of the remaining youth may have qualified for or needed financial assistance. The Department of Children and Families has not established a method for tracking youth who qualify for assistance or a method for projecting the number

of youth it will need to serve in future fiscal years. A March 2005 DCF memo recommended that department managers not maintain “waiting lists” pending formal rule promulgation.

The providers we contacted indicated that some former foster youth want nothing to do with the program once they reach adulthood, and that some likely made a smooth transition to independent living and reached their educational goals without state assistance. However, some providers indicate that eligible youth are not receiving needed financial assistance. For example, one provider reported that as of July 2005, it was disbursing these funds to 103 young adults, but estimated that there were at least 125 more former foster care young adults in the county who may be eligible for assistance but were not being served.

**Exhibit 13
Slightly Over a Quarter of Former Foster Youth Received Financial Assistance During Fiscal Year 2003-04¹**

Financial Award by Youth	Number	Percentage	Median Amount
Receiving Assistance	1,365	28%	\$ 7,609
Not Receiving Assistance	3,447	72%	0
Total Former Foster Youth	4,812	100%	n/a

Financial Award by Type	Number	Median Amount
Road to Independence	1,116	\$ 7,267
Transition Funding	641	1,975
Emergency Aftercare	157	1,200
Total Awards	1,914	n/a

¹ The total financial awards are greater than the number of youth receiving assistance because youth may receive more than one type of assistance.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Children and Families’ HomeSafeNet and disbursement data.

We identified four reasons why some youth in the target population do not receive program assistance. First, some young adults may not know that the aid is available. Providers were not required to contact foster youth who left the program before the 2002 act was passed, although youth are eligible for services until they reach 23 years of age. As shown in Exhibit 14, most of the young adults receiving independent living assistance in Fiscal Year 2003-04 were under 21 years of age. Relatively few older youth, who

generally left the program prior to 2002, received services, and providers reported that they did not focus on identifying or serving these young adults.

Exhibit 14 Over Three-Quarters of Independent Living Disbursement Recipients Were Between 18 and 20 Years Old¹

Age	Number of Recipients	Percentage
14-17	3	>1%
18	215	16%
19	476	35%
20	359	26%
21	165	12%
22	114	8%
23-24	35	3%
Total	1,367	100%

¹ Three youths between 14 and 17 inclusive received subsidized independent living funding. Thirty-five youths age 23 to 24 received funding in error.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of department data.

Second, some young adults who apply for aid do not meet eligibility requirements. For example, a young adult who seeks Road-to-Independence assistance had to have been a dependent child living in licensed foster care or subsidized independent living at the time of his or her 18th birthday. While the department indicates that some youth applied for but were not eligible for funding, the department does not capture data on the number of such youth.

Third, the transition of independent living services from the department to the community-based care providers may have contributed to youth not being served. Ten of 12 community-based care providers we surveyed became operational between 2002 and 2004 and were in the process of establishing internal mechanisms to identify and serve young adults during Fiscal Year 2003-04. For example, Family Matters, the provider for Nassau County, took over the program in March 2004 and only had four months to set up the program and begin disbursing funds before the end of the fiscal year.

Finally, providers have experienced funding shortfalls. Although provider disbursements exceeded their budget authority by nearly \$600,000 during Fiscal Year 2003-04 and by

\$1.1 million during Fiscal Year 2004-05 (which the department covered with other funds), they reported that they lacked funding to serve all eligible youth. For example, one provider estimated it would need approximately \$863,000 to maintain its current level of services for 103 young adults in Fiscal Year 2006-07, but anticipates that 60 more youth will age out of foster care by July 2006. Without additional funding, financial assistance will have to be reduced.

Two factors contributed to providers not being able to fully fund the demand for financial assistance. First, the department lacks data on the number of youth eligible for services because it has discouraged providers from maintaining client waiting lists pending formal rule promulgation. Waiting lists would enable providers to identify clients who are eligible for financial assistance but who are unable to be served due to a lack of resources, and allow the department to more accurately report budget needs to the Legislature. The absence of data on the need for assistance also hinders the department's ability to accurately allocate funds among providers to meet these needs.

Second, some providers were exceeding the allowable thresholds of funding categories. In contrast to the Road-to-Independence funding, there is not a statutory award amount for transitional and aftercare funding. In the absence of statutory direction, the department set limits of up to \$5,000 per year in transition funds and up to \$1,000 per year in aftercare, and it developed general guidelines for disbursement. However, in Fiscal Year 2003-04, over half (54%) of all aftercare recipients and 17% of transition recipients received more than the maximum amount allowed. As reported by the Auditor General, some districts and providers indicated they were not aware of the spending caps for Aftercare and Transitional Support.⁵ Staff also indicated that Aftercare and Transitional Support spending caps were sometimes exceeded on a case-by-case basis due to emergency needs of the young adults. In other instances, posting errors to the financial records resulted in spending caps being exceeded.

⁵ Department of Children and Family Services – Independent Living Transition Services Program - Operational Audit, Auditor General Report No. [2005-119](#), February 15, 2005.

As a result of these problems, some providers may not have had sufficient funding to serve all eligible youth.

To address the funding shortfalls, the 2004 Legislature required the department to create and implement a means test to better match the financial award with the financial status of each recipient. The assessment takes into consideration young adults' sources of income (earned or unearned) to determine the amount needed to attend school. The unearned income considered in the test includes tuition and fee exemptions, federal income, and other scholarships. The result of the means test should be that funds will be available for more young adults.

Is department oversight sufficient to ensure quality independent living programs?

While the department's oversight of community-based care providers has improved over time, more improvements are needed.⁶ Specifically, two problem areas need to be addressed:

- contracts have not established minimum standards of care for independent living programs, and
- quality management processes have not ensured that providers are delivering quality services.

Contracts do not specifically require community providers to meet minimum standards for independent living

To ensure that independent living services are consistent in content and quality throughout the state, it is important that department contracts establish minimum standards for these services. Our November 2004 report recommended that independent living programs meet minimum standards in the areas of life skills, housing,

education, employment, health, aftercare, and transitional services. The department's current contracts do not establish specific standards in these areas but instead require providers to deliver services "described in statute," although Florida law simply lists the services that providers are required to deliver. As a result, the department has not established minimum performance expectations that providers should meet in delivering these statutorily required services. For example, Florida law requires providers to offer mentoring and tutoring services to youth, but does not specify how often or for which youth. Without more detailed performance expectations in the contract, the state has little assurance that providers are offering meaningful mentoring and tutoring services. To hold providers sufficiently accountable, we continue to believe that department contracts should require independent living programs to meet minimum standards.

Independent living quality management standards do not assess quality

While the department has developed extensive quality assurance review procedures to monitor its community-based providers, these procedures provide only limited oversight of independent living services. The department has established a two-stage quality assurance monitoring program. Reviews of community-based providers are conducted twice a year by the department's field staff and once every three years by the central office. However, while these reviews assess compliance, they do not adequately address program quality and cover all programs administered by the providers, which include not only independent living, but adoptions, foster care, and other child protection programs.

The biannual reviews of community-based providers evaluate independent living programs using a 12-item checklist that directs staff to determine whether youth have been assessed for program services and whether these assessments have occurred at suitable intervals. However, the checklist does not provide an assessment on the quality of programs being offered, and does not assess whether these programs are effective in helping youth develop independent living skills.

⁶ These issues have been discussed in prior OPPAGA reports on the transition to community-based care. See *Child Welfare Transition Nearly Complete; Budget Allocation and Oversight Systems Need Strengthening*, OPPAGA Report No. 05-12, March 2005; *DCF Improves Readiness Assessment Process: However, Additional Changes Are Needed*, OPPAGA Report No. 04-65, September 2004; *DCF's Lead Agency Readiness Assessment Process Meets Statutory Requirements, But Needs Strengthening*, OPPAGA Report No. 04-15, February 2004.

The quality assurance instrument used by the central office contains no references to the independent living program.⁷

These monitoring processes could be improved by providing an expanded assessment of whether providers are meeting contractually required minimum standards for independent living programs and are producing desired outcomes. For example, as noted earlier in the report, foster youth have significantly poorer educational outcomes than same-aged students. To evaluate how well providers were helping foster youth with their education, department monitoring staff could assess the educational achievement level of foster youth, determine whether the provider delivered remedial help with the youths' school work, and help with applications for colleges and financial aid. As recommended in our first report, the quality of these efforts could be evaluated with measures such as the percentage of foster youth performing at or above grade level or the percentage of youth entering two- or four-year-college degree programs.⁸

Recommendations

To improve the state's ability to estimate the program's funding needs, we recommend that the department collect data on foster care youth as they transition from care to identify how many

⁷ During the course of our fieldwork the department began making plans to re-engineer its quality management program. The department plans to require providers to conduct internal quality assurance reviews that meet minimum department requirements. Department field staff will then verify that providers have met these requirements and department headquarters will ensure that federal guidelines have been followed. The department plans to initiate this process in April 2006.

⁸ *Independent Living Minimum Standards Recommended for Children in Foster Care*, OPPAGA [Report No. 04-78](#), November 2004.

qualify for financial assistance and Road-to-Independence Scholarships. The department also should instruct its lead agencies to maintain waiting lists of eligible clients, which will enable it to better prioritize services to former foster youth.

To improve the program's financial management and avoid overpayments to former foster youth, we recommend that the department track the amount disbursed to each young adult to ensure that payments do not exceed established thresholds.

To better assess the effectiveness of independent living services provided by the lead agencies, we recommend that the department improve its oversight of community-based care providers in two ways. First, the department should develop minimum standards of performance for independent living programs and include these quality standards in its contracts with these providers. Second, the department should strengthen its monitoring efforts by examining program results as well as compliance. As noted in our prior report, the department should establish outcome-based performance standards for providers such as the percentage of foster youth performing at or above grade level. The department's new quality management process should include these outcome-based standards.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Secretary of the Department of Children and Families for review and response. The Secretary's written response to this report is on page 13.

OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021 or 800/531-2477), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

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Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Director

Appendix A

Methodology

Overview

We compared the educational and employment outcomes of youth who spent time in foster care versus non-foster care youth. We obtained demographic data from the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) HomeSafeNet system for current and former foster care youth between the ages of 13 and 22, inclusive (the ages served in the Independent Living program), as of June 30, 2004. We obtained academic information for youth in Florida public schools in 2003-04 from the Department of Education's Automated Student Information System. We obtained information on employment, postsecondary enrollments, and public assistance from the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) for former foster care youth, ages 18-22, and for Florida's same-age general population.

Education outcomes

Our analysis compared educational outcomes of foster care children ages 13 and older to all Florida children ages 13 and older in the Florida public schools in 2003-04. We first matched the HomeSafeNet foster care data to the Automated Student Information System data on client identifiers variables, such as name and Social Security numbers and flagged the foster care clients in the education data. This data set included information on FCAT scores, disciplinary action, school changes, homelessness, exceptional student education, and dropout prevention program participation for students resulting in a total of 1,318,216 non-foster care youth and 3,587 foster care youth.⁹

Former foster care youth

We also matched DCF HomeSafeNet data with data from FETPIP.¹⁰ From the data we obtained from FETPIP, we were able to determine how many former foster care youth, 18 and older, were employed, in postsecondary education, receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) or food stamps, or had contact with criminal justice system.

For comparison, we analyzed the data in FETPIP's *Annual Outputs Report* for fall 2003 for 2002-03, 2001-02, and 2000-01 graduates and dropouts, the most recent published data for these cohorts. We chose these cohorts because they would be of similar age to the former foster youth. We excluded 18-year-old clients from the former foster youth group since they would have been 17 at the time of publication and not comparable to the cohorts included in FETPIP data.¹¹

Community-based care provider survey

We visited Independent Living Services providers in each of DCF's six zones based on recommendations from DCF to determine how they are implementing their programs. During these site visits, we met with DCF administrators, community-based care (CBC) providers, former foster care youth, foster parents, and advocates. We then conducted a survey of 16 of these providers to obtain an update of how each provider has progressed in providing these services. Of the 16 providers we surveyed, 12 responded.

⁹ The number of students with FCAT scores was 812,897 for non-foster care students and 2,313 for foster care students.

¹⁰ The number of former foster care youth we found FETPIP data for totaled 3,626.

¹¹ The FETPIP office provided us with comparable postsecondary information that was not included in its *Annual Outcomes Report*.



**State of Florida
Department of Children and Families**

Jeb Bush
Governor

Lucy D. Hadi
Secretary

December 12, 2005

Gary R. VanLandingham, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street
Claude Pepper Building, Room 312
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for your November 22 letter with the attached draft report titled, "Improvements in Independent Living Services Will Better Assist Struggling Youth." We appreciate the opportunity to respond to your preliminary findings and conclusions. Below we outline your findings and recommendations and provide our response to each.

Finding #1:

Foster youth tend to have poor academic outcomes due in part to their lack of school permanency, disabilities, disciplinary problems, and homelessness. In addition, former foster youth, compared to the same-aged population, often struggle with self-sufficiency upon leaving the foster care system.

Department Response:

It is agreed that many youth in foster care struggle academically because of the factors listed above. Another factor to be considered is that many of these children are from homes that may not have provided academic support resulting in educational deficits at the time the children entered foster care. Intensive work is needed to make up these deficits.

It must be noted that while these findings are contained in a report on independent living services, educational needs are a foster care system issue in general. The department has entered into an Interagency Agreement with the Department of Education and Agency for Workforce Innovation. This agreement is intended to improve the collaboration between agencies and provide better services for children in foster care and those exiting care. Local agreements similar to the state agreements are being

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developed as well. The state agreement is intended to be the model for development of local agreements.

In addition, the department must address federal education outcome measures for all children age 0-18 in order to be successful in federal Child and Family Services Reviews and, the department has crafted new rules regarding educational case planning requirements for children in foster children in draft administrative rules that are being developed.

Finding #2

Although the independent living program is intended to assist former foster youth, most potentially eligible young adults do not receive program services.

Department Response:

The report indicates that only 28% of the potentially eligible young adults receive assistance. While this percentage is low, there has been a notable increase in the number of young adults served over the past three years. A HomeSafenet report from October 31, 2005 indicates that 1377 young adults were receiving the Road to Independence Scholarship. Prior to October 2002 when the Road to Independence Act became law, an average of 300 to 350 young adults received services from the department after reaching age 18. This is further demonstrated by a remarkable reversal in the use of Chafee dollars to fund the 13-17 and 18-21 year old populations during the same time frame. This represents a dramatic increase in participation since the current legislation went into effect.

Finding #3:

Current department contracts do not specifically require community providers to meet minimum performance standards for the independent living program. In addition, the current standards do not assess program quality, and the department's sampling methods result in inadequate oversight.

Department Response:

The regulations for outcome measures required by the federal law and funding source (Chafee) have not been issued by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The latest information from ACF is that regulations are undergoing an administrative rules process for approval of these outcome measures. This has slowed the approval process more than initially anticipated. The outcome measures were scheduled to be released in 2005, but have been delayed. The federal law specifies outcome measures such as educational attainment, high school diploma, employment, avoidance of dependency, homelessness, nonmarital childbirth, incarceration, and high-risk

behaviors. Once the federal regulations are issued, the department will be required to update its child welfare information system (HomeSafenet) to comply with the federal requirements.

The department's Office of Quality Management 3 tiered-system will be restructured placing greater accountability at the Community-Based Care level for monitoring with validation at the Zone level or 2nd tier. The Zone will also be tracking performance through various other data sources for continuous quality improvements by the Community-Based Care provider. The new Quality Management System model will begin transition in April 2006.

The department's new strategic and business plans have added measures, that target teens in foster care. These include educational measures and ensuring that teens receive the services identified in his or her life skills assessment.

Core elements, relating to outcomes prescribed by the federal Child and Family Services Review process will be published for use across the three tiers. Core elements will include some that are specific to the independent living services.

Recommendation #1:

To improve the state's ability to estimate the program's funding needs, we recommend that the department collect data on foster care youth as they transition from care to identify how many qualify for financial assistance and Road-to-Independence Scholarships. The department also should instruct its lead agencies to maintain waiting lists of eligible clients, which will enable it to better prioritize services to former foster youth.

Department Response:

The department agrees that it is important to know how many foster youth qualify for assistance as they exit care. Program staff will work with budget and data staff to determine how best to collect this data.

The department agrees that it should develop methods for projecting future funding needs for the independent living program. This will help in determining the need for budget management and possible legislative budget requests.

Recommendation #2:

To improve the program's financial management and avoid overpayments to former foster youth, we recommend that the department track the amount disbursed to each young adult to ensure that payments do not exceed established thresholds.

Department Response:

The department has hired a Central Office budget specialist for the Independent Living Program. The budget specialist has developed an accounting system that will make it easier to determine how the money is spent. The Central Office Independent Living budget staff will continue to provide technical assistance to Zone and district budget staff to determine the best way to track aftercare and transitional support services payments and ensure payment do not exceed the established thresholds.

Recommendation #3:

To better assess the effectiveness of independent living services provided by the lead agencies, we recommend that the department improve its oversight of community-based care providers in two ways. First, the department should develop minimum standards of performance for independent living programs and include these quality standards in its contracts with these providers. Second, the department should strengthen its monitoring efforts by examining program results as well as compliance. As noted in our prior report, the department should establish outcome-based performance standards for providers such as the percentage of foster youth performing at or above grade level. The department's new quality management process should include these outcome-based standards.

Department Response:

The community-based care providers that contract with the department are required to follow state law and Administrative Rule in providing an array of services. The department is currently in the process of promulgating Administrative Rules for Independent Living Services and all of Out-of-Home Care as well.

The department notes there is evidence of strong best practice in the Independent Living Program by many of the service providers. For example, Hillsborough Kids Inc. (HKI) has formed a strong partnership in the community that has been recognized by receipt of outside funding to hire education specialists that assist youth in foster care in establishing career goals and identifying the needed course work to achieve these goals, as well as ensuring that the student is receiving the proper services through the school system. HKI was also selected as a pilot site for the "Connected by 25" program which assists youth as they transition to adulthood to ensure that they have the resources need to be successful by age 25.

The department will continue to work with these providers and assess contracts for sufficiency, as well as ensure model practice is shared.

Gary R. VanLandingham
December 12, 2005
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As mentioned earlier, the Office of Quality Management will be restructured and will begin transition to a new model of monitoring in April 2006. The new model will use core elements specific to independent living services and place greater accountability at the Community-Based Care level with validation at the Zone level. The recommendations contained in this report regarding quality assurance efforts are endorsed and underway.

Finally, the federal Child and Family Services review instrument has been modified for the next round of reviews. States have been noticed on proposed changes and we should expect to have a Rule section of the review instrument devoted to teens in foster care, specifically.

Please feel free to contact myself or Director of Family Safety Beth Englander if any further information is needed.

Sincerely,

/s/
Lucy D. Hadi
Secretary

cc: Sheryl Steckler, Inspector General
Beth Englander, Director of Family Safety Program Office