

## DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

### Workforce Development for Foster Care Youth/Young Adults

Virginia Commission on Youth

October 19, 2021

**Finding:** There is a lack of communication and coordination of resources with state, local, and private agencies that offer services to those who are currently being served or have been served in the foster care system.

1. Direct the Virginia Department of Social Services, in cooperation with the Virginia Commission on Youth, Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, Department of Education, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Medical Assistance Services, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, the Department of Labor, the Virginia Community College System, including the Great Expectations Program, local workforce development boards, the League of Social Services Executives, private providers and advocacy groups to develop the iFoster Portal or an App with similar functionality to include Virginia- and locality-specific resources that are available for individuals who are currently being served or have been served in the foster care system, as well as for professionals serving the foster care population. Resources include workforce development assistance, educational opportunities, housing and living stipends or discounts, financial supports, internship and employment opportunities, and other resources that are available in Virginia for those involved in the foster care system. Update the App regularly with additional resources that are available to assist in the development of becoming a successful and independent adult. Ensure that all state and local agency employees working with foster care children, join and use the iFoster App with their foster care clients, assist foster care youth in subscribing to the App themselves, and remain current with newly added or updated resources.
2. Request the Virginia Social Services System (state and local departments of social services), through its regional and local offices, to identify workforce development organizations (such as Goodwill, Virginia Department of Labor and Industry's Apprenticeship Program, Great Expectations, etc.) and other foster care transition support resources in each locality, add them to the iFoster App, and communicate those opportunities to the local agencies on at least an annual basis.

**Finding:** Private companies and non-profit agencies are willing to hire those who have been in foster care. These organizations need to better understand the challenges of youth who have experienced foster care by becoming trauma informed. This awareness training will facilitate a smooth transition into the work world for both parties and

encourage the development of a graduated training structure and mentoring plan to ensure success. Many times employers do not understand trauma consequences that could impact the work habits and attitude of an employee. Employment or entrepreneurship support are critical to help foster care youth and young adults and alumni to be successful in their workplace. The Virginia Workforce Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center, (VWIEC), an entity of Hampton University, in partnership with Old Dominion University, provides free services such as mentorship, education, networking, pitch competitions and assistance with financing strategies for adults who wish to become entrepreneurs. In addition, VWIEC provides supports for participants by removing barriers that restrict them, including child care, transportation, certification costs and business licensure fees.

3. Request that local workforce development boards recruit and engage potential employers who hire foster care young adults and alumni in training that includes the effects of trauma, related child care issues for parenting youth, and gradual accountability strategies for employment success. Encourage employers to work through challenges on work attendance and productivity with external job coaches to support workers in finding success.
4. Request the Workforce Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center to provide support for foster care young adults and alumni who need business assistance. Those working with young adults in the foster care system who are interested in starting their own business should connect the young adults to VWIEC.

**Finding:** Great Expectations is a nationally recognized program that helps Virginia's foster youth earn the postsecondary credentials they need to achieve an independent and successful life. Currently, Great Expectations is available in 21 of the 23 Virginia Community Colleges and will be in all of the Community Colleges by the end of the year. Through the program, foster youth gain financial and additional supports needed to ensure their successful completion of the degree/credential sought. Currently, Virginia's program is funded solely through private funding.

5. Introduce a budget amendment to develop a state-funded grant program for the Great Expectations Program. The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) shall develop the grant program to provide a range of funding for Community Colleges in the following areas: the hiring of college coaches or mentors; housing stipends; child care; and transportation needs. VCCS shall report to the Commission on Youth the outcomes of the grant program by November 30 each year.

**Finding:** A point of contact is needed in Virginia colleges and universities to assist those who have been in the foster care system. Students with a history of a traumatic childhood living in a variety of foster care situations often suffer from post-traumatic stress and need extra support while becoming independent and learning how to face

life's challenges while attending college, working, and sometimes taking care of a family.

6. Introduce a budget amendment to direct the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to examine the feasibility of having a point of contact at each state and/or private college and university for those who have been involved in the foster care system. SCHEV shall investigate the possibility of using federal dollars (such as the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) for this purpose and report their findings to the Commission on Youth by November 30, 2022.

**Finding:** The Fostering Connections to Success Act and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and Title I, Part A provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) is intended to ensure school stability for students in foster care, requiring child welfare agencies to coordinate with school divisions. School counselors provide a critical link in assisting foster youth's educational and sustainable employment success.

7. Request that the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides virtual training for school counselors that includes trauma informed strategies for those working with students experiencing foster care, resources available with the iFoster App, and the importance of knowing these students and providing consistent checks and support. The Commission also requests that the VDOE partner with the Virginia Alliance for School Counseling (VASC) and the Virginia Department of Social Services to develop this training.
8. Request that the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) issue a memorandum that provides guidance to local school divisions regarding resources for school counselors on providing supports for students experiencing foster care, including the requirements of completing an interest inventory, the Career Connections course, and the Academic and Career Plan, as well as the updated guidance for the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate* (which establishes multiple paths toward college and career readiness for students to follow in the later years of high school, which could include opportunities for internships, externships, and credentialing). This guidance will also include resources on leveraging existing data and information on various career fields, job trends and salaries, and resources available to local school divisions from the Weldon Cooper Center and how to specifically support foster care youth and link to specific resources (such as the iFoster App, Fostering Futures, Great Expectations, successful independent living programs, etc.).

**Finding:** Quality Independent Living programs are beneficial to the youth and young adults who have experienced foster care by providing a gradual independence plan. These programs include standards of completion with requirements for a high school/GED diploma, driver's license and stable transportation, savings account,

possession of a secured credit card, stable housing and employment, ownership of and access to vital records, and permanency.

9. Request that the Virginia Social Services System (VDSS and LDSS) review their requirements for foster care Independent Living programs in Virginia and include a gradual independence plan that includes these Standards of Completion. Quality Independent Living programs ensure that the youth are knowledgeable and have practical application experience with budgeting, housing solutions, job expectations, emotional regulation and management skills, transportation and health care options, communication skills, as well as problem-solving in the real world. Ensure each LDSS has a workforce development plan.

**Finding:** The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Youth Program is designed to serve low-income youth who face barriers to continued education and employment which includes those youth either in, or aged out of, the foster care system. Services provided through WIOA may include, but are not limited to, the following elements: work experience opportunities; occupational skills training; on-the-job training; GED and high school completion options assistance; tutoring and basic skills education; leadership development opportunities; financial literacy; career counseling and exploration services; assistance with navigating child care options for parenting youth; post-secondary education preparation; entrepreneurial skills training; apprenticeship opportunities; and supportive services.

10. Request that Virginia Career Works, through the local workforce boards, prioritize and promote serving the foster care population with WIOA funding and other workforce development opportunities.

**Finding:** Foster care families receive a maintenance payment to provide for the basic needs for the foster child in their care. The Virginia Enhanced Maintenance Assessment Tool (VEMAT) is used to determine the need for, and amount of, enhanced maintenance when a child has a clearly-defined need that requires the parent to provide increased support and supervision due to the child's behavioral, emotional, or physical/personal care requirements. When children first enter foster care, it is expected that their needs may be higher due to the circumstances that led to the child's removal and the impact of the removal itself. However, as the child stabilizes in the foster home and the child's needs are met consistently over time, it is expected that the child's on-going need for support and supervision would decrease, and therefore the VEMAT score would decrease with subsequent reassessments. As a result, it may be viewed that foster families are financially penalized for a child's success.

11. Direct the Virginia Department of Social Services to convene a stakeholder group to determine the feasibility of adopting a new uniform assessment tool in determining the enhanced payments for children in foster care with additional needs. The stakeholder group shall consist of representatives from the

Department of Social Services, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Office of the Children's Services Act, Office of the Children's Ombudsman, private providers, licensed child placing agencies, local departments of social services, foster parents, and advocacy groups. The stakeholder group shall investigate ways to provide more flexibility regarding the foster care payment to address a wide variety of needs for hard to place children, including financial incentives for serving these children, and develop ways to ensure accurate documentation. Consideration should be given to current assessment tools used in determining a child's needs such as the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) tool.

**Finding:** Lack of transportation options provide a barrier for foster youth in trying to obtain an educational degree or employment. Evidence reveals that youth who leave foster care without their driver's license are less likely to make a successful transition to adulthood. These young adults are more likely to have limited housing, employment, and education choices. Without transportation it is difficult for those involved in the foster care system to get a job and establish a work history.

12. Introduce a budget amendment to support the development and implementation of a statewide driver's licensing program to support foster care youth in obtaining a driver's license. Funding shall be made available to local departments of social services to reimburse foster care providers for increases to their existing motor vehicle insurance premiums that occur because a foster care youth in their care has been added to their insurance policy. The program may also reimburse foster care providers for additional coverage (i.e., an umbrella policy or the equivalent) that provides liability protection should a foster care youth get into or cause a catastrophic accident. Additionally, funding shall be made available to foster care youth in Virginia's Fostering Futures Program to assist in covering the cost of obtaining motor vehicle insurance. The Department of Social Services shall develop reimbursement policies for foster care providers and foster care youth. The Department shall coordinate and administer the driver's licensing program based on best practices from similar programs in other states, to include developing educational or training materials that educate foster parents, private providers, and foster youth about 1) liability issues, insurance laws, and common insurance practices (to include laws about renewal and cancellation, how long an accident can affect premiums, how to establish that a foster youth is no longer living in the residence, and other applicable topics); 2) DMV requirements to obtain a learner's permit and driver's license; 3) what funding and resources are available to assist in this process, to include paying school lab fees for "Behind the Wheel" or paying a private driving education company; and 4) why getting a driver's license on time is important for normalcy and a successful transition to adulthood. The Department shall provide information on how many foster care youth were supported by this program and any recommendations to

improve the program to the Governor, Chairmen of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees by November 30 each fiscal year.

**Finding:** Lack of access to child care is a barrier to successful employment for parenting youth/young adults. Finding and paying for quality child care is a barrier to holding a steady job or completing an education program. Currently, local departments of social services will assist parenting youth in foster care with child care costs either through IV-E funding or the Children’s Services Act. However, when the youth is no longer in foster care these funding sources are no longer available.

13. Request foster care workers and others working with youth experiencing foster care to identify child care resources for their parenting youth. Ensure that youth aging out of foster care are placed on the local child care assistance program waiting list prior to aging out of care.