



COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

Commission on Youth



Foster Care Roundtable Highlights

October 5, 2021

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- Held 5 in-person and 1 virtual roundtable discussions throughout the state
 - Harrisonburg – July 20, 2021
 - Richmond – July 21, 2021
 - Charlottesville – July 22, 2021
 - Williamsburg – September 23, 2021
 - Abingdon – September 27, 2021
 - Virtual Roundtable – October 4, 2021



- Total Participants with VCOY Staff:
 - 18 Foster Care Youth, Young Adults, or Alumni
 - 1 Legislator
 - 2 LDSS Directors
 - 7 Local Department of Social Services Foster Care Supervisors and Staff
 - 9 Non-profit Organization Representatives (Fostering Acadia, Goodwill, Impact Living Services, Virginia Career Works, VCU, Voices for Virginia's Children)
 - 5 Community College/Great Expectations Representatives
 - 1 Higher Education Advocate



- More funding is needed to recruit foster care families in the community in which the youths already have connections and support.
- Students need consistent and engaged caseworkers at the school and in the local department of social services to provide the logistical and emotional support needed.
- Students in foster care are finding it difficult to graduate high school due to the lack of universal curricula, credit systems and term schedules across Virginia school divisions.
- Students need to be exposed to a variety of careers and vocations at a young age (12-14 years old) to be successful in determining their strengths and interests to pursue sustainable employment for the future.
- Students need engaging life skills training/mentoring/coaching to help prepare them for independent living. Gradually decreasing financial assistance over time encourages students to prepare for independence.



- Foster care youth are turning 18 without credit history to secure housing or car loans. Affordable housing is often non-existent.
- Youth who are in residential foster care facilities are even less prepared for independent living as everything is done for them in the group home.
- Youth do not know about the resources available to them, such as Great Expectations.
- Social-emotional support needs are not being met for these youth.
- Rural areas of the state do not have reliable transportation for the youth to get to work and go to post-secondary school.
- Youth are not always given the opportunity to reunify with birth parents.
- The iFoster App would be very helpful.



- Funding for Foster care youth needs to be mapped out.

- Independent Living Programs are not being held to a “standard of completion.” Eight domains are recommended by Fostering Acadia to hold programs accountable:
 - Education Completion
 - Driver’s License and owning a vehicle
 - Savings- at least \$1K
 - Creating Credit History with a secured credit card
 - Stable Housing
 - Stable Employment
 - Having Copies and Access to Vital Records
 - Permanency



- Foster care youth are not taking advantage of programs (Penn Foster Online K-12, Project Life, Speak Out, Fostering Futures, etc.).
- Need to hold foster families accountable for earnestly helping their foster youths with academics, life skills, and exploring their community and the world. There is a need for tutoring and education/emotional supports.
- A separate advocate is needed for the youth because there is no “right of appeal” for the youths. A Children’s Ombudsman program might help.
- Workforce exploration and development needs to start earlier (age 14 years old at least). Foster care youth need help finding a job that they are interested in.
- Training in finding kinship/relatives is needed for local caseworkers.



- Trauma-informed Care (TIC) directives are needed for all agencies working with foster care youth.
- Need a holistic approach to working with foster youth (emotional, logistical, housing, physical health, life skills, etc.).
- Virginia punishes instead of rewards foster families.
- Need better use of the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act for ages 16-24.
- Need training for job core skills (LEAP).
- Need more case managers in the field.
- Use Fostering Futures more strategically.



- Need high quality and relevant life skills classes.
- Need programs to foster self-worth and build intrinsic motivation. These students need social-emotional support.
- Need for an Independent Living coach or mentor for each foster youth to provide support and guidance. Housing discounts and initiatives would be helpful. (Perhaps work with faith communities to help mentor and coach these youth.)
- A designated point of contact at each institution of higher education (IHE) for student support would foster success.
- Publicize resources for foster youth-iFoster App sounds great!
- Establish levels of exposure to the world and community—perhaps a small activities stipend.



- Middle and high school students in foster care are not finding out about the career and financial resources available to them (Great Expectations, Fostering Futures, etc.).
- Social workers are not providing social-emotional and career guidance.
- Great Expectations and other funding needs to be more flexible to meet unique needs of foster care students.
- The housing stipend offered by Great Expectations has been a great success.
- A point of contact at colleges and universities is needed.
- The Great Expectations program provides a pathway for success.



- Students would benefit from dedicated career counseling, and it needs to start in 8th grade.
- Popular vocational programs are often at capacity; students in foster care are left out (e.g., Certified Nursing Assistant--CNA).
- Foster parents need training on career resources/options.
- Funding to explore hobbies could lead to more meaningful career choices.
- Youth in foster care need to know their rights, as well as strategic thinking, problem-solving, project management, and other high functioning skills.
- Grants and support for business start-ups are needed.
- Need to work with undocumented foster care sooner on obtaining necessary paperwork.

Common Themes from Roundtables



- Foster care youth and young adults need a way to learn about and connect with financial, emotional, educational, and other support programs, coaches and mentors in their community.
- Funding is needed to increase flexible support for Great Expectations, decrease foster care case loads, and improve access to community resources.
- Better communication and data sharing across state agencies, schools, and organizations for foster care youth is warranted.
- Accountability standards for foster families and Independent Living organizations must be developed and enforced.
- Consistent mentors and coaches create stability and a safety net for each youth and young adult who has experienced foster care.



- Virginia school guidance counselors, public and private, need to provide standard career exploration, exposure to a variety of career fields, and interest assessments for every student.
- Each Institution of Higher Education (IHE) needs to have a dedicated and reliable support coordinator for young adults who have experienced foster care.
- Life skills classes need to be timely, relevant, engaging and emulate real-life situations.
- Meaningful Independent Living (IL) experience is needed that prepares youth for independence.
- Local workforce development boards should prioritize the foster care population.



ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Draft Findings and Recommendations



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.

Recommendation 1:

Develop the iFoster Portal/App 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.



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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 3:

Engage potential employers who hire foster care alumni in trauma-informed and accountability strategies training for employment success.



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.

Recommendation 4:

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; 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.

Recommendation 5:

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.

Recommendation 6:

Request the Virginia School Counselor Association include training at its annual conference on foster care. The training should include 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. A representative from Great Expectations and Social Services should be invited to assist with this training.



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.

Recommendation 7:

Request that all Virginia middle and high schools have dedicated guidance counselors who can provide consistent workforce development coaching for students experiencing foster care, including interest and strength surveys, exposure to various career fields, job trends and salaries, and resources available to the foster care population (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, a savings account, possession of a secured credit card, stable housing and employment, ownership of and access to vital records, and permanency.

Recommendation 8:

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 either in or aged out of the foster care system. Services provided through WIOA may include, but 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 exportation services; post-secondary education preparation; entrepreneurial skills training; apprenticeship opportunities; and supportive services.

Recommendation 9:

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