

SURVEY FOR CHILDREN AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

STUDY PLAN

Study Mandate

- During the 2017 General Assembly Session, Delegate Farrell introduced House Bill 1451 directing the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), in coordination with the Virginia Commission on Youth (VCOY), to develop a process and standardized survey to gather feedback from children aging out of foster care.
- The survey is to include requests for information regarding the child's experience with and opinion of the Commonwealth's foster care services, recommendations for improvement of such services, the amount of time the child spent in the foster care system and any other information deemed relevant by VDSS or VCOY.

Identified Issues

- Foster care provides services, substitute care, and supervision for children on a 24-hour basis, until a child or adolescent can either return to their family or become a permanent member of another family. Because foster care is intended to be a temporary response to address family concerns, caseworkers establish a permanency goal for each child to ensure that the child will have a safe and stable family with which to live.
- Youth who "age out" of the foster care system reach the age of 18 without achieving a permanent home environment. The difficulties facing youth who age out of care are well established in research literature. These youth often face lifetime challenges, including homelessness, incarceration, and low educational attainment.
- Policies designed to support youth in the transition from foster care to adulthood are relatively new. Virginia's Fostering Futures Program enables the extension of foster care financial and social support and services up to age 21 for youth who are in foster care when they reach age 18; and youth who were in foster care at the time of commitment to the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice. Virginia's Fostering Futures program became effective July 1, 2016.
- Although much is known about the difficulties foster youth face in the transition to adulthood, literature offers relatively few examples detailing the perspectives of former foster youth. Ascertaining how former clients felt about their experiences in foster care, which factors affected their quality of life once aging out, and what efforts/service enhanced their outcomes is critical to assessing the quality of Virginia's foster care services. These efforts may improve efforts in reducing the number of youth who leave care unprepared for adulthood.
- VDSS has implemented Virginia Children's Services System Practice Model to increase the effectiveness in assisting at-risk children and their families strengthen permanent family connections. A major principle set forth in in the Practice Model is to ensure that youth voices are heard, valued, and considered in all decision making within the limits of established community standards and laws.
- A survey of former foster youth perceptions will help to provide knowledge about the quality of life for children in foster care.

Study Activities

- Work with the VDSS/other impacted stakeholders
 - Local departments of social service representatives
 - Virginia Community College representatives/Great Expectations
 - Conduct regional round tables
 - Virginia Youth Advisory Group – Project LIFE
- Collaborate with VDSS in gathering feedback from foster youth/former foster youth
 - Invite key stakeholders and impacted agencies to participate in focus groups
- Provide assistance as needed to VDSS in developing recommendations for survey questionnaire
- Present findings and recommendations to VCOY