

2023 Evaluation Summary of the Foster Youth Strategic Initiative

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Introduction

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s Foster Youth Initiative (Initiative) aims to ensure that all transition-age youth with foster care experience “lead healthy, meaningful, and choice-filled lives” through investments and partnerships in Atlanta, Los Angeles County (LA), and New York City (NYC), as well as nationally.¹ Across its three geographies, the Initiative reaches approximately one in 10 youth ages 14-20 in foster care nationwide.² The Initiative’s strategy centers on foster youth themselves, caregivers (e.g., kinship caregivers and foster parents), national field building, and research and evaluation, with specific sub-strategies including education and career development, housing, reproductive health and parenting, mental health, and caregiver recruitment, retention, training, and support. As evaluation partner to the Initiative, Child Trends evaluates progress toward the Initiative’s goals using administrative and survey data. We unpack the story behind these numbers and identify opportunities for the Initiative to increase their impact by conducting interviews and focus groups with grantees and public agency leaders, reviewing grantee publications and media, and engaging our Evaluation Advisory Board comprised of individuals with lived experience in foster care.³ This summary highlights progress toward the Initiative’s 5-year goals, shares examples of grantee efforts, and summarizes progress and barriers across six levers of change employed by the Initiative to promote positive outcomes for youth.

Progress Toward 5-Year Goals

The Initiative set five goals to achieve by the end of 2025. The table below indicates progress toward these goals since 2020. In some instances, data are unavailable or measured differently in each jurisdiction, as indicated in the legend.

5-Year Goal	Atlanta	LA	NYC
75 percent of foster transition-age youth and 60 percent of key subgroups graduate high school in five years			
Gap in high school graduation rates between foster and all youth reduces to 18 percentage points			
55 percent of foster transition-age youth high school graduates and 40 percent of focal subgroups are enrolled in postsecondary pathways within a year*			
75 percent of foster transition-age youth ages 14-17 are in family-based placements			
Five other major U.S. jurisdictions are replicating initiative-tested approaches			

Legend:

- = Data unavailable
- = Data shows progress is being made but target not yet achieved
- = Data shows progress is not being made
- = Target achieved as of 2023

*For LA, we measure the percentage of high school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education within 16 months. This target has been achieved for the focal population of youth of color in LA, but not for all foster transition-age youth. For NYC, we measure the percentage of youth who aging out of foster care who were enrolled in postsecondary education at the time of exit from care. Data are not available for most focal subgroups.

Grantee Efforts by Sub-Strategy

The Initiative’s work is focused on the following sub-strategies related to foster youth and caregivers, designed to address some of the ways different systems have failed to adequately support young people with foster care experience. The table below describes examples of grantee efforts to improve the lives of youth over the past year.

Sub-strategy	Examples of grantee efforts
Education (K-12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-led by First Star and National Center for Youth Law, the California Foster Youth Pre-College Collective raised \$5 million dollars for LA to overcome the educational impact of COVID-19 • HeartShare St. Vincent Services in New York City enhanced its Fair Futures programming with Initiative funding to provide wellness programming for middle schoolers and build trusting relationships between staff and youth and caregivers.
Postsecondary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Burton Advocates for Youth led advocacy for and is supporting implementation of NextUp, which provides support and services to community college students with foster care experience. The FY 24 CA state budget maintained the \$30 million allocated in FY 23 to expand NextUp to all community colleges in the state. • The J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development has been funded to identify postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates for foster youth in Atlanta and engage young people in data collection and interpretation.
Career development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Way of Greater Atlanta has been developing a coordinated approach to connecting young people with apprenticeship programs through CareerReady ATL. • The Door’s Academy program and JCCA’s Fair Futures career development coaching are tailored to help young parents and Black and Latinx youth, respectively, in New York City achieve their career goals.
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Fair Futures’ Youth Advisory Board’s priorities on housing have been adopted by NYC child welfare leadership. The Advisory Board has prioritized vouchers and high quality, affordable housing, among other priorities. • Children’s Law Center advocated for and provided referrals for housing and other services for expectant and parenting youth in LA.
Reproductive health and parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The RAND Corporation’s landscape analyses in Atlanta, LA, and NYC will map the availability of services for expectant and parenting youth. • CA Reproductive Health Equity Project provided feedback and recommendations on the first annual state report on foster youths’ reproductive health outcomes, required by AB 172. This report disaggregated data by race and ethnicity.

Sub-strategy	Examples of grantee efforts
Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • California Children’s Trust is developing a framework and financing model to leverage Medi-Cal to expand High-Fidelity Wraparound • Harvard Government Performance Lab will be providing technical assistance to the public child welfare agencies in Atlanta, LA, and NYC to strengthen the array of community-based behavioral health services.
Caregiver recruitment, retention, training and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise A Child has replicated its caregiver recruitment model in Atlanta, focused on caregiver recruitment for LGBTQ+ youth, as well as youth of color and large sibling groups. • To support implementation of SB 354 and reduce barriers to relative placements, Alliance for Children’s Rights is providing trainings for legal professionals and caregivers in CA.

Levers of Change

The Initiative promotes improved outcomes for transition-age foster youth through six approaches or “levers,” outlined in the table below. We summarize progress within each lever, as well as barriers the Initiative’s grantees and public agency partners face in advancing their work in these areas.

Lever of Change 	Progress 	Barriers 
Systems reform efforts⁴	<p>Grantees use several strategies to advance systems change, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using data to raise awareness and advocate for improvements • Supporting cross-system collaboration and new partnerships • Monitoring implementation of existing policies • Advocating for more or sustained funding to fill critical gaps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy implementation barriers include lack of agency staff, lack of agency accountability or oversight, and lack of sustained investment • Challenges impacting the general population (e.g., housing shortages, lack of mental health providers) are exacerbated for the systems that serve youth in foster care. • Systems struggle to provide the same levels of support as they did prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lever of Change 	Progress 	Barriers 
Practice interventions⁵	<p>Grantees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide direct services to young people and caregivers • Make referrals to supportive services • Train staff and caregivers • Provide legal representation • Support implementation of publicly funded services <p>The Initiative has also supplemented and seeded public investments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service gaps persist (e.g., vocational training, nontraditional and culturally responsive mental health services). • Eligibility criteria can be cumbersome to navigate. • There are significant workforce challenges. • The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic persist, particularly related to access to education and mental health services and supports.
Youth voice⁶	<p>Grantees engage young people through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering their input • Facilitating leadership development programs • Elevating youth voice in media, webinars, and roundtables • Engaging young people on hiring committees • Hiring and/or electing youth to their boards • Co-designing services and policy agendas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many youth engagement approaches remain more extractive (e.g., focus groups wherein youth are asked questions) rather than youth-led. • While some improvements have been made, greater efforts are also needed to engage youth in their individual case planning. • Capacity building is needed for young people and adults, and bureaucratic barriers can make it challenging for public agencies to pay young people for their time.

Level of Change 	Progress 	Barriers 
<p>Strategies to improve outcomes for focal populations⁷</p>	<p>Grantees support equitable outcomes for youth in one or more focal population by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing tailored services • Analyzing disaggregated data • Mapping systems of services to identify gaps, • Training staff • Advocating for policy • Promoting narrative change <p>The Initiative’s small grants program funds community-based organizations often led by individuals with lived experience and/or individuals of color.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people in the focal populations continue to face systemic barriers (e.g., housing and employment discrimination) to necessary services. • Without disaggregated data for LGBTQ+ youth, parenting youth, and youth who have experienced exploitation, solutions are not data driven. • Service gaps include tailored mental health services and affirming placements.
<p>Research and evaluation⁸</p>	<p>Grantees use research and data to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness of issues • Understand policy implementation • Support practice improvements • Build evidence for programs <p>Systems-level advances include writing data requirements into policy and increasing data collection and technical assistance to use and understand data (e.g., through new data dashboards).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key data points are still not collected or collected uniformly. • Systems struggle to integrate data across systems to track progress. • Differing levels of capacity across agencies and providers make it challenging to use available data. • More evidence is needed on the effectiveness of programs and policies for youth currently in and exiting foster care.

Lever of Change 	Progress 	Barriers 
Foundation leadership⁹	The Initiative continues to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fill gaps in public funding • Spur implementation of key reforms and hold systems accountable • Facilitate learning and collaboration across grantees and system stakeholders • Provide long-term yet flexible investments • Share innovative and effective strategies across jurisdictions 	Areas of growth for the Initiative include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding opportunities to meaningfully engage young people, caregivers, and frontline staff in their ongoing work • Continuing their ongoing investments in systems change with the acknowledgement that change can be a slow process

Conclusions

The Initiative has achieved its goals related to family-based placements and disseminating approaches to other jurisdictions and made notable progress toward others in advance of 2025. Child Trends' evaluation highlights the innovative and impactful work of the Initiative's grantees and offers considerations for the Initiative's continued work. Key recommendations include:

- Continue to support the long-term initiatives and partnerships that are necessary for systems-level change across all levers (e.g., to ensure policies are implemented as intended, to fill identified service gaps, and to build evidence and data to advocate for sustainable public funding).
- Continue to foster learning opportunities across grantees and jurisdictions by sharing success stories from peers in other jurisdictions, elevating new research and data, and bringing grantees and partners together.
- Build grantee and Initiative capacity to partner with young people in designing, implementing, and evaluating their work.
- Consider new areas of investment to address emerging needs (e.g., expanding the focal populations to include youth with intellectual/developmental disabilities, investing in new research to illuminate the experiences of youth in the focal populations).

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the valuable contributions of our Evaluation Advisory Board members: Daniel Bisuano, Alejandra Guerrero, Jamie Kelley, Nilsa Morales, and Tonia Ramsey. We thank the grantees and public agency staff who participated in interviews and focus groups to inform our understanding of the progress made, barriers faced, and opportunities for strengthening youth- and family-serving systems in Atlanta, Los Angeles County, and New York City. We are grateful to the public agency and grantee staff who responded to our data requests. Finally, we appreciate the opportunity to serve as the evaluation partner to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth Initiative and applaud the Foundation's commitment to continuous learning.

Suggested citation: McKlindon, A., Jordan, B., Naylor, K., Ball, J., Ibarra, A., Martinez, M., Sanders, M., Liehr, A., Malm, K., Bell, A., Mueterthies, G., Muñoz, K.S., & Osorio, E. (2024). *2023 Evaluation Summary of the Foster Youth Strategic Initiative*. Child Trends. 10.56417/4147w1801f

Endnotes

¹ Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (2024). Foster Youth: Strategy25 Summary. https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Foster-Youth_2023.pdf

² Estimate calculated using data provided to Child Trends by Georgia’s Division of Family and Children Services, Los Angeles County’s Department of Children and Family Services, and New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (as of July 1, 2022) and national AFCARS data as of September 30, 2021 (the most recent available data).

³ Child Trends’ Evaluation Advisory Board members focused on housing in 2023 and shared their reflections on the data and recommendations in: Bell, A., Osorio, E., Bisuano, D., Guerrero, A., & Kelley, J. (2024). Transitioning out of Foster Care With Dignity: Lived Experts’ Recommendations to Strengthen Housing Support Systems. Child Trends. <https://doi.org/10.56417/2373s7342u>

⁴ System reform efforts include new policy, policy monitoring and implementation activities, collective impact initiatives, coalition-building, and communication to the field on system reform priorities.

⁵ Practice interventions include programs serving youth and caregivers, and public investments to develop, scale, and sustain programs.

⁶ Youth voice includes youth engagement in systems reform and practice interventions, developing and implementing recommendations, and reframing/centering the narrative

⁷ Strategies to improve outcomes for focal populations include use of specific strategies to improve outcomes the Initiative’s focal populations: youth of color, expectant/parenting youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth who have experienced exploitation.

⁸ Research and evaluation include using data and research to drive systems reform and practice interventions.

⁹ Foundation leadership includes the role of Initiative staff in leadership, agenda setting, and partnership-building.